

## Tilburg University

### Open source evaluation

Shimshock, S.M.

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**OPEN SOURCE EVALUATION: TRANSFORMING THE  
EVALUATOR AND THE EVALUAND FROM ROLES TO  
PARTICIPATORY ACTIONS**

**Proefschrift**

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overstaan van een door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie  
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door

**Stephen Michael Shimshock**

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**Promotores:** Prof. dr. J.B. Rijsman  
Prof. dr. H. Anderson

**Promotiecommissie:** Prof. dr. S. St. George  
Dr. E. Tseliou  
Prof. dr. J. Wolff  
Dr. B. Cottor  
Dr. J. Roevens

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation has two distinct purposes. The first is to explore the principles behind self-organization as seen in open source software projects and other types of Internet based mass-collaboration such as Wikipedia. It is important to note that the focus is not on the technological tools these projects employ but rather the organizational principles guiding the output of these projects. The term “open source” is widely used to describe decentralized practices in which participants have open access to the source materials used for development and production. These practices are transforming the ways we think about information, organization, and the delineation of power within roles such as producer and consumer. There are some clear linkages and similarities between the organizing principles found in these Internet based collaboration projects and the general principles seen in various perspectives of social construction. If the organizing principles at work in these projects are not inextricably linked to the technological infrastructure can they be extracted and applied in non-technical environments? The second purpose of this dissertation is to provide a case study as an answer to that question. The case study highlights the development and implementation of a participatory evaluation project with a collaborative group of public and private agencies in Boise, Idaho that serve youth aging out of the foster care system. The project was developed utilizing the concepts gleaned from Internet based forms of organization and social construction viewpoints. The aim of the project is to build (in an open source fashion) an evaluation project from the ground up. The role of the evaluator and all tasks related to the evaluation are distributed across the group being evaluated. The findings suggest that the major components of an evaluation project (analysis, sense making, and summary) can be distributed across the group being studied to produce a highly relevant and localized body of knowledge from which the group can take action.

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## **How this Dissertation is Organized**

This dissertation begins with an introductory prologue followed by four sections. The prologue serves as the foundation for understanding the context that led to the project and how the project began. Section one is entitled, Lessons from the Internet. This section highlights specific Internet based issues such as self-organization, delineation of power, determination of value and relevance. These issues are deeply explored to uncover some underlying principles and how those principles can be applied in non-technical environments to facilitate collaborative sense making and collaborative action. Those steeped in social construction will likely see many similarities between the principles gleaned from the Internet and social construction. However, I intentionally kept this section separate from the section on social construction because it better represents the chronological sequence of my experience. Intuitively I knew interaction of a different kind was taking place on the Internet but I lacked the words or theories to describe it. I was witnessing social construction in action long before I knew about social construction. I stumbled upon social construction in an effort to understand what I was seeing on the Internet. Section two is entitled, The Social Construction Orientation. This section provides an overview of the theoretical framework used in the case study and draws parallels between social construction and the principles found in the Lessons from the Internet section. Sections one and two serve as my literature review. The third section is a detailed case study of the participatory evaluation project developed for a group of Idaho service providers collaborating to serve youth aging out of foster care. Finally, section four offers a discussion regarding the project and recommendations for future inquiry projects.



## Prologue

My fingers tapped on the steering wheel as I waited for the light to turn green. I glanced at the street name three times to make sure I was heading in the right direction. Despite living in the Northwest for fifteen years, navigating through Seattle continues to bewilder me. As the light turned green my thoughts returned to the meeting I would soon be attending. I often find myself rehearsing conversations before meetings with new people. My mind raced with ideas about how this conversation could be different from previous ones. As I arrived my thoughts quickly shifted to the practical task of finding the right meeting room. I found my way to the small meeting room and sat down with six other people. We all came from different public and private social service agencies, however we all shared a commitment to providing quality services to youth aging out of foster care. On this day our goal was to discuss ways we could evaluate the impact of the work taking place in Seattle. Specifically, something that could articulate the usefulness of working collaboratively.

Freshly inspired by the book *Fourth Generation Evaluation* (Guba & Lincoln, 1990), my hope was to introduce evaluation from a different perspective. Fourth generation evaluation is a phrase devised by Guba and Lincoln to describe approaching evaluation from a constructivist paradigm. At the most fundamental level, the difference lies within the basic assumption that there exist multiple socially constructed realities as opposed to a singular objective reality governed by cause and effect. In addition, the “researcher” is not an “objective observer,” rather the researcher becomes an intimate part of the process, co-creating the inquiry with the “subjects” of the inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1990). I think cause and effect has its merits when explaining phenomenon like gravity or temperature, however I believe a social construction paradigm is necessary when inquiring into social phenomenon where you may

have multiple experiences of a seemingly singular event.

It is important to note that I was not a regular member of this collaborative group. I worked in the quality improvement department for a non-profit agency, Casey Family Programs. Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused solely on foster care and improving the child welfare system (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Many direct service non-profit agencies in social services operate off of grant money and other types of State and/or Federal contracts. Casey operates off of the interest earned from its endowment. Casey does not receive any outside funding. The generous endowment came from Jim Casey, the founder of United Parcel Service. The agency was started in 1965 and focused primarily on providing private long-term foster care. The agency has grown over the years into other areas of social services. One of those areas was developing collaborative partnerships with other agencies to provide services to young adults aging out of foster care. As a member of the quality improvement team, I worked to provide support for the day-to-day operations of our field offices, specifically whenever there could be data collection and reporting implications. We had nine offices in five different states. I was invited to this meeting by the supervisor of community programs from our Seattle office. I was there as a guest to present an idea.

The meeting began with the usual introductions and brief overview of our loose agenda. This group of collaborators was made up of both private and public agencies. We each took turns talking about the evaluation and data collection efforts of our respective agencies. Casey had developed a set of outcome indicators that several of the partners were using. However, everyone was in agreement that those measures were too youth specific and narrow for the collaborative work. The measures were focused primarily on youth outcomes and did not provide any information on how agencies worked together. In addition, the

measures were completed by staff and lacked youth input. We all agreed that a deeper understanding of the collaborative work and the voices and experiences of the young adults receiving services would be helpful in making decisions regarding service provision.

There were two themes that emerged during the discourse of this meeting. First, outcome information can be helpful to define a baseline of functioning. However, it does not clearly point to the causal elements that led to the outcomes. For example, an agency may focus on improving educational outcomes by providing tutoring services but lack of adequate public transportation creates an access barrier for the youth that need tutoring the most. In such a case you may see an overall decline in educational outcomes, not because the tutoring services are inadequate but because they are not being utilized. This is an example where a youth specific outcome, graduation and grade promotion, is too narrow to provide meaningful information at a community level to see how transportation may be affecting the utilization of the tutoring program. The second theme that emerged was a sense of disconnect between the youth served and the service providers. Several agencies had experimented with youth involvement but it equated to little more than inviting youth to participate in a quarterly strategic planning meeting. We wanted to develop a way for youth to be more actively involved in defining the challenges in the community and creating solutions.

I did my best to present how we could use the concepts from the *Fourth Generation Evaluation* book to gain deeper insight into what the youth needed and use that information to inform decisions regarding service provision. The partners were interested but my presentation fell apart when they began to question how we would actually implement such an evaluation. I was clear on the concept but not so clear on the methodology. The meeting came to a close with the usual, “this sounds interesting we will be in touch.” I left the meeting feeling a bit

strange. The participants appeared interested conceptually, yet we did nothing to develop a plan to move forward. Something was missing. Shortly after that day the Casey staff person that invited me to the meeting changed jobs. The Seattle office shifted its priorities and began to shrink its role in the collaboration serving youth aging out of foster care.

While nothing came from the meeting in Seattle that day, it served as a pivotal moment in my journey to find new ways to understand collaborative work. It also helped me formulate better questions which would become the foundation of this dissertation. I found myself with far more questions than potential implementation solutions. That changed when a coworker of mine invited me to meet with our executive vice president to talk further about how we could evaluate our collaborative work in our other field offices. The purpose of the meeting was not to pitch a fully formulated evaluation plan for all nine of our offices but rather to pitch an idea of how we could pursue a case study with one office and grow the idea from there.

The timing was perfect. I had just enrolled in the Ph.D. program through Taos-Tilburg, and I was hoping I could use the evaluation project as my dissertation project. In addition, our executive vice president was under pressure to provide some type of evaluation of our collaborative work. The other caveat was that he could not hire any additional staff to do the work. The conditions were ripe but I was feeling a bit anxious. This would be the first of many “stretch” moments for me. I like to know what I am doing from beginning to end before I do it. In this case I was asking to pursue an idea without fully knowing whether or not it would work or where it may lead.

We sat down in our vice president’s modest office. I quickly realized this was my first time in his office with his undivided attention. He was an approachable man with a long

stride and a soft voice. My coworker spoke first to set the context for the meeting. He talked about our need for evaluation but was asking permission to take an unorthodox approach. “So unorthodox that it doesn’t exist,” was my first thought. Then our executive vice president turned toward me and asked, “How will we determine the effectiveness of our collaborations?” Something clicked, or perhaps snapped, in me. I replied, “How effective are you as a father and a husband? And, please provide me with evidence so I can I determine whether or not you should continue to engage in those activities.” Fortunately, my response was taken in the humorous manner I intended. However, I was somewhat serious. “It’s a ridiculous question for me to ask isn’t it?” I said, hoping to get myself out of this with my job intact. We weren’t discussing internal work of Casey. We were talking about collaborative work with other agencies, sometimes these collaborations involved fifty or more agencies. Who were we to come in and question their effectiveness? While still looking at this man several pay grades above me, I asked, “What if I made a simple change to the question? What have you learned as a father and as a husband? What kind of conversation will emerge from that question?” With an understanding grin he asked, “What are the next steps?” My coworker smiled and I knew we had just received our green light. Now the only question was to determine what type of methods to employ to represent the change from an evaluation of effectiveness to an evaluation of how a group learns and takes action together.

This dissertation presents the evolving answers to several questions I continued to ask myself as I approached the task of evaluating the collaborative work of multiple agencies serving youth aging out of foster care. I struggled with the term evaluation because I was not interested in any type of cause and effect relationship between intervention and outcome. My

interest was to help a collaborative group come to a deeper understanding of how they learn together. In addition to learning I was interested in how they would use what they learn to take future action. The following questions are the first set of questions guiding my thought process.

- *How does a collaborative group learn together?*
- *Where does the knowledge of a collaborative group reside?*
- *How can that group build upon previous knowledge?*

These questions guided my literature review into the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is created and maintained, especially within the context of a group or community.

It is important to note that my curiosity about how people learn and take action together was being fueled by my growing interest in how people were connecting and creating things on the Internet. I felt like there was a natural connection between the type of evaluation work I wanted to pursue and the types of collaboration taking place on the Internet. Specifically, I was intrigued by sites like Wikipedia.org. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia held together by a very small staff and thousands of volunteers organized in a non-hierarchical meshwork. I was interested in how they organized and how they distributed the task of writing an encyclopedia across thousands of people. How can an encyclopedia open for editing by anyone in the world with Internet access remain intelligible? How has it not just turned into complete drivel? This led to a second set of questions.

- *Can evaluation be broken into smaller tasks and distributed across the group that is being evaluated?*
- *Can a group conduct and author their own evaluation?*

The meshwork environment of a collaboration seemed perfect to explore these questions. I still had one major obstacle; I needed to find a group that would be willing to explore this

type of evaluation process. By this time I had enough information to sketch a very simple outline to approach this work. I created three bullet points to highlight what a group could expect to learn by engaging in this process.

- *What does your community look like? This would require a methodology, likely a narrative one, to paint a portrait of life for young adults aging out of foster care and the service providers who serve them.*
- *What did we learn? This would require a methodology to make sense of the data collected in the first step.*
- *What action will we take based on what we learned? This would involve the more familiar methods of planning and implementation.*

My hope was to develop a process that could become a regular, perhaps annual cycle that would incorporate and build upon each previous cycle, and most importantly could be carried out by the collaborative partners. I would obviously play an initial role in development but I did not want the process to be dependent upon my continued participation. I called several of our supervisors of community programs. Five of them invited me to make presentations to their collaborative groups. Two of the groups were very interested. However, one of them had a major shift in partnerships and the interest waned. The only remaining interested group was the Idaho Resource Opportunities Communities and Knowledge or IROCK as they liked to be called.

IROCK is a mid-size collaborative group with about thirty participating public and private agencies. The common thread between the agencies is their commitment to providing excellent services to at-risk youth in the Treasure Valley area in Idaho. The group represented a broad range of services including but not limited to education, job training, life skills,

counseling, and housing. Their interest in participating in this project stemmed partially from their desire to improve their ability to articulate the story of their work, especially to outsiders. Specifically, the State of Idaho was interested in using the IROCK collaboration as a model for establishing collaborations Statewide.

To provide further context it is important to understand that the Casey field office in Boise, like other Casey field offices, focused primarily on providing foster care services. State child welfare offices often refer cases to Casey if the youth is older and likely to stay in care until they age out. Casey had a history of working with this type of youth. The collaborative work where Casey was partnering with other community agencies was fairly new and considered ancillary to our core foster care work. The internal need was to understand if the collaborative work was worth the staff time and money. My hope was that this project would result in a work product that would satisfy Casey's internal need, meet the needs of the collaborative partners in Boise, and finally meet my own personal need of using the project for my dissertation.

My Casey colleague in Boise invited me to present some information to the IROCK collaborative partners at one of their quarterly strategy meetings. At the meeting in Boise I invited members to talk about their needs regarding how to articulate what they do and the impact it is having on the young adults in their community. Everyone was in agreement that the focus should be on how the group learns and takes action and that it should be participatory and inclusive of the young adults served by the agencies in the collaboration. The group happily agreed for me to play a lead role in helping the group design the process and methods. However, during implementation my role would not be that of evaluator, but rather facilitator of the evaluation process. The service providers and the young adults they serve would be the



evaluators as well as the evaluatees.

The group was interested in learning more about participatory processes and wanted some examples. While there are ample examples of participatory and action research in community settings, the examples most clear to me came from the Internet. That is where I first learned about participatory processes and mass collaboration. Learning about participatory inquiry, action research, and social construction came later. The examples were fresh in my memory not just because I studied the Internet, technology, and computers but because I grew up with them, they were a part of my life.

## **Section 1 – Lessons from the Internet**

### **Chapter 1 – My Fascination with the Internet**

My path to social construction began in an unusual place. I stumbled upon social construction in an effort to find words and theoretical constructs for what I was witnessing on the Internet. I felt as though I was literally seated in the front row of an interesting drama playing out before my eyes. The more I studied the Internet the more I was sure something significant and revolutionary was taking place. The Internet was not something foreign to me, I grew up in the age of the personal computer which ultimately paved the way for the Internet as we know it today.

The Internet provides us with a living model of mass human cooperation. It is rapidly changing the way we think about information, knowledge, and even ourselves. In the last decade the number of worldwide Internet users has jumped from 360 million users to nearly 2 billion (Internet World Stats, 2010). This is amazing considering the Internet as we know it today (specifically the Internet based on TCP/IP technology) has only been around since 1983 (LivingInternet.com, 2000). The Internet took the world by storm in the nineties and quickly transformed the personal computer from a static disconnected computing machine to an interconnected communication device. It is unfortunate that one of the visionaries behind the Internet, J. C. R. Licklider, died before seeing the fruition of his vision. In a 1968 paper Licklider described an online community being made up of “communities not of common locations, but of common interest” (Licklider, 1968). The Internet would not be possible without the mass production of personal computers. It was during the personal computer boom in the seventies and eighties that my interest in technology blossomed.

I was born in 1970, shortly before the birth of the personal computer. As an adult I am often sought out by colleagues and friends to help them with problems of a technical nature. A large part of my work day is spent managing a data management software system for a non-profit child welfare agency. However, I have only taken one computer class in my life. It was an elective I took while pursuing my degree in music theory and composition. I later went on to get a masters degree in psychology and I am now working on my Ph.D. in social science. When people hear this they often ask, how did you learn what you know about computers?

That story begins in the late seventies. My brother, who is six years older than me, had saved up some money and bought a TSR-80, a computer made by the Tandy Corporation. It was the first foray into the personal computer market. It was a magnificent sight to behold and I was awestruck by the thought of what it could do. Tired of playing the role of observer over my brother's shoulder, I decided I needed some firsthand experience. I waited for the moment my brother left the house. I was a diligent observer so I knew how to turn it on and get it to show up on the television screen. I made only one or two key strokes before the unthinkable happened. My brother walked in the room. Remember, I was about eight at the time, and he was about fourteen. There is a rather large physical difference between those ages. I was petrified. My heart sank, and then I was surprised by my brother's response. He wasn't angry. In fact I believe he smiled, almost impressed at my eagerness to learn. I will never forget what he said to me that day, "don't worry, you can't break it. If it stops working just turn it off and turn it back on again." To this day I am not sure my brother knows the impression those words made on me. Those words guided my early learning about technology and continue to guide my learning to this day. Technology was not something to fear, it was something to interact with and learn by way of experience. In addition, computers offered me an early glimpse into one of the key

concepts of social construction, the notion of multiple realities, or multiple views of a seemingly singular event. In writing a program for a computer, or simply using a computer, there are multiple ways of accomplishing the same task. Some ways are more efficient than others depending on the circumstances. The more you interact with a computer the more adept you can get at finding new and innovative solutions to the same problem. Take a simple task like cutting and pasting text in Windows. You can select some text on a page and click on the Edit menu and select Cut then move your cursor to the desire position and again click on the Edit menu and then select Paste. This same result can be achieved by using the right click button on the mouse or by using ctrl+x and ctrl+v. All three methods produce the same result. There really is not a “correct” way to do the procedure, you simply choose which way works best given the circumstances. This simple principle shares many similarities with social construction.

The massive boom in the personal computer market paved the way for the Internet as we know it today. My introduction to the Internet came by way of a coworker while I was working for a company that focused on workforce literacy. Our “computer guy” as we called him was a former Apple employee. I told him about my interest in computers and that I would appreciate any mentoring he could provide for me while we worked together. That was in the early 1990’s. He showed me a new type of information platform called America Online (AOL). At that time it had limited content and lots of chat rooms. I remember looking at his screen and asking, “What is that?” I was pointing to an icon that consisted of three letters (WWW). He replied, “That is coming soon, it’s called the World Wide Web.” I was hooked just from hearing the name. The web of course had already been in use by scholars and the military but AOL was going to offer a way for anyone to access it.

The Internet ushered in an historic change in the way we communicate. That change continues to evolve today and I personally think we are only beginning to understand the total impact of this change. The early Internet seemed to resemble previous conceptions of media like print and television. Content was mostly static and fully polished. The Internet was seen almost as an extension of print and television. That quickly changed as more and more people used the Internet as a communication device. It's as if the telephone, television, radio, and print media all merged into one medium. Today the Internet is a robust network with an astonishing amount of information available.

The Internet changed the flow of communication from one-way (such as television, radio, and print) to two-way communication. Consumers can communicate directly with producers and in some cases, like Wikipedia and other open source content, someone can be both a consumer and producer. When I tell people that my project was inspired by lessons I have learned from the Internet they instantly think I am talking about technology. The technology is fascinating, but even more fascinating is how people form groups, establish norms, and work together to get things done on the Internet, often without any financial reward. The idea of someone using their “free-time” to enhance a product is not a common notion. It challenges our most basic assumptions about economic behavior (Benkler, Coase's Penguin, or Linux and the Nature of the Firm, 2002). Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia allowing anyone with Internet access the ability create and edit articles, has over 17,000,000 articles in over 270 languages (Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2011). It is nothing short of amazing that Wikipedia has not turned into drivel given that anyone has the power to change a page. It is not maintained by paid employees, rather it is maintained by more than 91,000 volunteers passionate about making knowledge available to the world for free (Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2011). Wikipedia is just

one of many examples of mass collaboration, where people self-organize to create a cohesive body of knowledge. The principles operating in these massive projects are very similar to ideas within social construction. In particular, Wikipedia could be considered an ongoing social construction of human knowledge.

In the next three chapters I will focus on some very specific Internet based topic areas and make connections between the underlying principles within that topic area and my dissertation project. Each chapter is structured in the same way. They each begin by highlighting a specific topic area from the Internet. From those topic areas I will distill several principles. I then explore each principle fully and describe how I applied the principle in this dissertation project. To some readers this section may feel like a diversion or even off topic. However, to an avid social constructionist the concepts should have a sense of familiarity to them. Each of the next three chapters represent issues where I could see something different was taking place; the status quo was being challenged. I knew this intuitively but I lacked a vernacular to adequately describe what I was witnessing. This is why I began to focus on the underlying principles. I wanted to understand what I was witnessing at a basic non-technical level. So while the topic areas may seem completely unrelated to a social construction approach to evaluation, the underlying principles within each topic area are totally in line with social construction thought and theory and influenced the design of this dissertation project.

## **Chapter 2 – Trust Me, I am a Professional**

Is a professional a type of person? This question led me to a flash of insight.

Professionals are who they are by what they do, not by some inherent quality that is inaccessible to others. A professional has developed a way of taking action within a set of industry acceptable standards. Why is this important? Because I was not a professional evaluator, yet I was working with a community to develop an evaluation project. How would I, or any member of the collaborative group, respond to the potential criticism of not using a professional evaluator? The simple answer is that this is an evaluation of a different kind. That may seem like a copout answer. But, it truly is an evaluation of a different kind, meaning that it would not be appropriate to compare this evaluation project with a more traditional form of evaluation. The orientation to information gathering, analysis, and sense making in this project differs significantly from traditional evaluation. A major goal of this dissertation project was to help a local community group of social service providers and the young adults they serve develop a way to better understand the issues affecting young adults in their community and take informed action based on what they learned together. The group did not need a professional evaluator, rather they needed a facilitator of evaluation processes that would allow them to become the evaluators of their own situation.

This concept was very familiar to me. I had been diligently following the debate between journalists and bloggers. The journalists in this case represent the professional class of news purveyors and the bloggers represent a group of people with a radically transformed orientation to information gathering and sharing. Journalists and bloggers both deal with information, however they are categories of people constructed from radically different orientations to information. The consequences of this debate affected more than just categories and roles, it has

affected the entire publishing industry. Similarly, this project was focused on establishing a different orientation to evaluation. Several of the key principles used in designing this evaluation project were drawn directly from lessons learned in the journalists and bloggers debate.

The Internet provided a virtual front-row seat to one of the most contentious debates of recent history, the journalists versus bloggers debate. The stakes are high for journalists who are seeing unprecedented declines in newspaper readership and ad revenue. The New York Times declared that 2009 was the worst year for ad revenue in decades citing a 27.2 percent drop from 2008 (Perez-Pena, 2010). The unfolding debate between journalists and bloggers serves as a great example to explore the assumptions and taken-for-granted positions about what it means to be a professional journalist. Professionals, as a class of people, exist in the context of the industry/practice that creates the need for them. More specifically, a professional exhibits certain behaviors and those behaviors have to occur within a specific context in order for the notion of professional to hold coherence. What is a journalist without a publisher? Is a journalist still a journalist if their stories are never seen by anyone else? The publishing industry is the context in which the professional journalist as a type of person emerges with coherence. The publishing industry is ultimately a business endeavor where the cost of publishing cannot exceed the money derived from the sale of published content. While this is an oversimplification of the publishing industry it is at the heart of the journalists versus bloggers debate. The Internet turned a business proposition into something different. The Internet allows for near zero publishing cost and opens the tools of production to anyone with Internet access. Anyone can publish their story to the world. Does that make them journalists? The journalists and bloggers



debate quickly dissolves into nonsense once you realize the two categories of people are based on entirely different orientations to information. Although cliché, it is apples to oranges.

It may be easier to think of a professional journalist, or any professional for that matter, as a filtering system rather than a type of person. It is common practice to hire a professional when you are in need of someone with a specialized skill. The term professional typically implies someone that has achieved, by some set of standards, expert proficiency within their given field. This affords you, as the consumer of their goods or service, a sense of trust in the value of what you will get before you actually invest. This allows a consumer to filter, or pre-screen, people without having direct experience of their ability to produce a particular output. In addition to filtering, credentials also instill a sense of trust. What is a journalist? Merriam-Webster defines a journalist as: a person engaged in journalism; especially: a writer or editor for a news medium (Merriam-Webster, 2011). In addition, the term journalism is defined as: The collection and editing of news for presentation through the media (Merriam-Webster, 2011). And finally, news is defined as: a report of recent events (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Based on these definitions a journalist is a person who collects and edits a report of recent events for presentation through the media. From this line of thought I would assume that a professional journalist is someone who is educated and/or has developed a set of skills for collecting, editing, and writing news for presentation through some form of media.

Is a person who reports on recent events through a blog a journalist? A blog is short for the term weblog, which can be loosely defined as a writer's journal of their thoughts and perceptions (a more comprehensive definition will be provided later). Fiona Fox, director of the Science Media Centre, recently chaired a study entitled Science and the Media: Securing the Future (Fox, Science and the Media Report, 2010). Four months after releasing the results of

the study Fox wrote a piece entitled “Blogs are Not Real Journalism” (Fox, Discussion on CoJo, 2010). In the article she commented on the study’s finding of scientists using blogs in productive ways and she ended the article by saying, “But they are not journalists and, to the journalist in my audience who says that what we call all this stuff doesn’t matter, I say words do matter – especially words that denote an entire trade built up around a set of norms” (Fox, Discussion on CoJo, 2010). Ironically, this article was published on the BBC’s College of Journalism blog.

The journalist versus bloggers debate is not really a debate at all. Performing a Google search on the issue would lead one to believe the debate is over and that bloggers and journalists have figured out a way to coexist. However, it does not make sense to compare these two constructs because they originated from completely different paradigms. Journalists and bloggers are constructs to describe a category of people that perform a certain function. Instead of debating their legitimacy as if they emerged from the same source it may be wiser to examine how these constructs emerged. Fox is correct in that journalists are part of a trade built around norms. But the more interesting question is whose norms are they?

Journalists are part of the publishing industry. As noted earlier publishing is a business. The high costs associated with publishing have created scarcity in the number of publishers. The relationship between publisher and consumer is few to many, or more accurately very few publishers to an enormous amount of consumers. A publishing company must make a viable return on their investment if they are to stay in operation. One way to ensure quality content is to hire quality writers, and behold, the journalist is born. The publisher can then use the journalists as a selling point to consumers by ensuring consumers they can trust the content of the publisher to be of good quality because they only hire professional journalists. Think of how many news

outlets use some variation of the catch phrase, “the most trusted name in news.” Consumers can trust the publisher because of this filtering system. This is what Clay Shirky would call a “filter, then publish” system (Shirky, 2008, p. 98).

Who is doing the filtering? There is a subtle but very important relationship between published content and the value it represents to the publisher. Publishers will filter for quality based on the content’s ability to satisfy its reader’s appetite. The power of defining quality is primarily in the hands of the publisher. This gives a publisher a tool to control costs, which decline as volume increases, therefore the more the content appeals to the masses the better, at least for the publisher. This can create an incentive for publishers to filter their content and make it more amenable to a larger audience. Yochai Benkler summarizes this by saying, “Rather than the fear that the concentrated mass media will exercise its power to pull opinion in its owners’ interest, the fear is that the commercial interests of the media will cause them to pull content away from matters of genuine political concern altogether” (Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, 2006, pp. 204-205). At a fundamental level a publisher is dealing with information production and distribution. And in most cases, the publisher owns the means of production. The cost associated with production and distribution creates scarcity and the necessity to treat the information as a commodity that can be owned and sold by the publisher. The journalists, regardless of their training and credentials, are intimately linked to the publishing system and value proposition inherent in that system. I am certain that this paragraph will offend some journalists in its simplistic overview of a long standing industry. However, the basic orientation to information as a commodity is hard to escape.

What happens when the cost of publishing nears zero and a publisher doesn’t have to own the means of production? What if information was not treated as a commodity to be sold

but something that could be freely shared? As publishing costs near zero and the tools of production become ubiquitous, publishers are no longer scarce, but rather they can proliferate in abundance. Shirky would argue, “When that scarcity gets undone, the seemingly stable categories turn out to be unsupportable.” In other words, the category, or construct, of journalist only has meaning within the context of the publishing industry which treats information as a commodity traded in an environment of scarcity. Comparing journalists and bloggers distracts from the larger issue under foot. It misses the revolutionary process of de-commoditizing information. This is not to say that bloggers do not make money; on the contrary some make a handsome living off of blogging. However, the choice to commoditize the information is made by individual bloggers rather than the entire blogging community and commoditization is not a perquisite for production.

The blogosphere, as it is often referred to, is not an industry in the traditional sense. The term blogosphere first appeared in 1999 in a blog post by Brad L. Graham (Graham, 1999). The term has come to represent all blogs and their interconnectedness. Marriam-Webster defines a blog as: “a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer; also: the contents of such a site.” Unlike the publishing industry, blogging is very inexpensive or even free to the content publisher using a tool like Google Blogger. And, the blogger typically does not own the means of production. Therefore a blogger does not necessarily have to worry about return on investment. They can publish whatever they deem worthy of publishing. Consumers on the other hand, now have the task (and power) of filtering through the myriad of published content to determine what is relevant to them. Shirky would call this a “Publish, then filter” system (Shirky, 2008, p. 81).

A blogger becomes a blogger by virtue of using a blogging platform. A platform is a technological term used to describe the hardware and software used to operate a computing system. Google Blogger, Tumblr, and WordPress are examples of blogging platforms. Many times the platform is provided for free to users in exchange for ads placed on the pages the user creates. A blogging platform can expose users to ads regardless of readership. A very popular blog with a million followers is the same as a million blogs with one follower each. The marginal cost of adding more blogs is next to the nothing for the provider. The cost (usually in the form of someone's time and access to technology) of content production and ownership remain with the user, not the provider. The provider is simply providing a publishing platform and letting the community at large negotiate relevancy and value. Print, in any form is far more expensive to produce than digital information. Likewise, if someone wants a printed version of digital information the cost of producing the printed material is paid for by the consumer not the provider. The separation between content production, platform provision, and filtering for value and relevance creates an interconnected information community as opposed to an industry. Journalists are rooted in the few publishers to many consumers model. Bloggers are rooted in a many publishers to many consumers model. And, publishers and consumers can communicate directly with one another. Value and relevancy are determined at a very local level.

The construct of a journalist is bound to the publishing industry because of the value proposition inherent in the industry. When that value proposition changes the constructs change too. A blogger is not a type of journalist. Blogging as a practice is publishing of a different kind. Therefore, it is difficult to compare journalists and bloggers, and in my opinion it is a pointless exercise in futility. The example is provided here to illustrate how changing the

underlying paradigm changes the associated constructs we have come to take for granted and opens the door for new possibilities.

What would a reinvented paradigm of evaluation look like? How would this change the role of evaluator and those being evaluated? How would the evaluation be conducted? Could evaluation escape the business proposition inherent in professional services? The Internet provided bloggers a very inexpensive means to publish which was a key in the paradigm change. Evaluation costs can be a barrier for groups to engage in evaluation, especially when those costs need to be shared across different organizations within the group. Another key aspect to the paradigm change was shifting the process of filtering from something publishers do before they publish to something consumers do as they scan the vast array of published material. In the context of evaluation I would equate this to shifting the processes of analysis and sense making from something the evaluator does to something done by those being evaluated. Finally, and arguably the most important aspect of the paradigm change, bloggers oriented to information as something to freely share as opposed to information as commodity to be bought and sold. This fundamental shift in orientation to information frees bloggers from the value proposition inherent in the publishing industry. The only constraints for a blogger to publish are access to the Internet and time. The parallel in the context of evaluation would be to engage participants in the development, implementation, sense making, and summary of the evaluation process. The final report would not belong to a person or group but rather everyone. Any member of the group could use the evaluation report in part or total for whatever purpose they need. The three important points from the journalists and bloggers debate could be summarized as follows:

1. Make every effort to significantly reduce the costs of producing the evaluation.

2. Put the power of determining value and relevance into the hands of those being evaluated, create an evaluation community.
3. Collaboratively develop the project and de-commoditize the output – no one owns the final report. If it is to be published we would publish it under the creative commons license.

### Reducing the Costs of Producing the Evaluation

The major costs associated with evaluation are the time of the participants and the time of the evaluator(s). There may also be some material costs associated with conducting the evaluation and writing up the final report. In this project the aspect of multiple agencies participating in the evaluation adds complications to paying for evaluation. All partners can agree to share the costs or a small group of partners may cover the costs. Both situations can create stress and potential conflicts of interest in the relationships between partners. To address issues of cost I approached my supervisor about utilizing myself in a new way. Casey Family Programs, my employer, has several field offices including the one in Boise. I work at our headquarters in Seattle, so while our Boise field office was a partner in the collaboration I was not a regular participant in their meetings. I asked if I could serve as an “evaluation facilitator” for the collaborative group. Casey is a non-profit foundation that operates off of the interest earned by the foundation’s endowment. I wanted to offer myself to the collaboration group at no charge to them. My services would essentially be free to the collaborative partners.

The intent was to create a project that the collaborative group could replicate on an annual or some other regular basis. My role would decrease over time as they take over all aspects of the project. This creates sustainability for the group. I intentionally chose tools such as Google Docs to produce materials for the group so they could maintain the project without

incurring any costs. Google Docs offers a variety of free-to-use software solutions for producing documents, spreadsheets, online surveys and more. Reducing the cost of the evaluation frees the output from being entangled with a monetary value and focuses the output of the evaluation more on its sense of utility to the participants. The focus changes from the evaluation being good or bad to the evaluation either being useful or not useful.

### Value and Relevance

Inquiry involves data collection, analysis, and ultimately sense making. It was important that the stakeholders performed as much of the analysis and sense making as possible in this project. It is worth repeating that this project focused on how this group could learn about the types of issues and challenges young adults face as they transition into adulthood in this community and take action based on what they learn. This differs from an evaluation of a program's effectiveness. The participants would play the role of researcher in determining what patterns in the data held value and relevance to them. And again, they would play the role of researcher to make sense of the patterns they found.

### De-commoditize the Output

Most evaluation efforts cost money. In previous evaluation projects that I saw with our collaborative partners the funding for evaluation projects was shared by only one or a handful of agencies. In essence, some small group would "own" the output of the evaluation process. This was a source of contention in the past with the collaborative partners in Boise. Partners who couldn't afford to contribute financially to the evaluation felt like they had less say in how it was written or in some cases they may not have even seen the final report.

The hope was to develop an evaluation process that would de-commoditize the output of the evaluation. The output should not be thought of as something that holds financial value, but



rather something that holds knowledge and action value. In addition the hope was to collaboratively write the final report and publish it using the Creative Commons License (Creative Commons). This would allow any collaborative partner to use all or part of the final report for any purpose they saw fit. This provided the collaborative partners tremendous flexibility in how they could use and re-use the output of the evaluation process.

## Chapter 3 - When Good Enough is all You Need

What would motivate someone to participate in an evaluation project? How could participants analyze and make sense of the data collected? How would they know if the evaluation was good? The previous chapter explored ways to develop a different orientation to evaluation and began to define what the evaluation could look like. This chapter focuses on participation, sense making, and situating the notion of good in the context of utility rather than good as an objective notion of quality. Again, the Internet and my own personal experience seemed an appropriate place to start. While struggling to find a solution to fix my television I encountered a video that presented some interesting challenges to the taken-for-granted concept of good quality. Specifically, the utility the video provided me far outweighed the low production quality. In addition, the fact the video was there for me to find and the fact I could find it also significantly influenced how this project oriented to participation and sense making.

Last year I went to turn on my television and was puzzled when instead of powering-up, my television made a clicking sound before coming on. I dismissed it as some anomaly and didn't think about it much after that. However, the problem persisted and got worse. In the beginning it would only click two or three times then turn on. After several weeks it could take twelve to fifteen clicks before the television would come on. Of course the warranty had just expired. I decided to Google my problem to see if other Samsung LCD owners were having a similar problem. They were. It turns out Samsung used a bad batch of capacitors and the clicking sound was one of the capacitors in the process of burning out. The prognosis was clear, the clicking will get worse and ultimately the television will no longer turn on. I found people who posted repair costs varying from \$300-\$500. I am a pretty handy person when it comes to repairs. I know what a capacitor looks like but I was certain this was beyond my capabilities,

unless, I had someone who could walk me through the process. I had the idea to look on YouTube, a place where anyone can post a video about anything. In the search box I typed in three words; Samsung, Capacitor, Replacement. Using just those three words I found over a dozen videos addressing that specific problem. After viewing several of them I decided to use the one posted by a user named “Milosmommy.” It was a two-part video running a total of about seventeen minutes. In the video, a man who calls himself the “professor,” takes apart his Samsung television in a step-by-step fashion and replaces the capacitors. His wife is filming the video and his toddler son, who he calls his “little helper”, is seen at various points wandering about in the background carrying a screwdriver. I showed the video to my nephew who is pretty handy with a soldering iron and the two of us fixed my television for about six dollars. While I was thankful for the video because it helped me solve my problem, I was now even more perplexed as to why that video was there in the first place. YouTube has thirty-five hours of video uploaded to the site every minute and in 2010 hit the milestone of over 700 billion playbacks (YouTube). Out of the hundreds of millions of videos on the site, how was I able to find the one I needed with just three words in my search? Exploring these questions had a large impact on the evaluation project design.

Why was the video there in the first place? This question is important because videos like this one simply did not exist a decade ago. Something had to motivate this person to take the time to make the video and then make it available for others to see. In addition, he had to find a broadcasting platform to publish the video. In the past, the underlying motivation behind those elements would have been financial. However, there are no apparent connections in this case to financial gain. This case challenges the notion of Homo Economicus, a rational actor primarily driven by their own self-interest (Etzioni, 1988). In looking deeper into the producer

of the video, the user named Milosmommy, the user does not appear to be a frequent poster of videos or someone who has monetized their videos on YouTube. At the time I saw the video it had roughly 10,000 views. Now, about one year later, the video has 234,000 views. While that may seem like a large number it is not the kind of traffic desired for someone looking to make advertising money from their video. Perhaps, the guy in the video thought that he could share his expertise with others by making the video and the intrinsic reward was sufficient to motivate the production. Yochai Benkler has made the case that this type of production actually encourages virtue. “Taking a moral perspective, we argue that the remarkable social and technical phenomenon of commons-based peer production fosters virtue by creating a context or setting that is conducive to virtuous engagement and practice, thereby offering a medium for inducing virtue itself in its participants” (Benkler & Nissenbaum, Commons-based Peer Production and Virtue, 2006, p. 403). Simply put, if you provide people a simple enough way to engage in virtuous behavior they will do it. YouTube is built to make it easy to share knowledge and information and it’s easy to see the effects of your efforts through the comments section. It’s a positive feedback loop. The video has over 400 comments posted most of which tell a story of success and express gratitude to the maker of the video.

Assuming the video maker was willing to act virtuously, the other important element in the story is the maker’s ability to publish the video. Similar to the blogging platforms mentioned in the previous chapter, YouTube is a video publishing platform that is free to use both for publishing and viewing videos. Participation is both free, relatively easy, and content approval is done by the user submitting the video. The last point may seem trivial but it is vitally important. Google, who now owns YouTube, does not approve content. They will take down highly objectionable material after someone reports it, but they do not have a policy of screening

the content that gets uploaded. This is something a normal media outlet would never do. Imagine CNN allowing anyone to do a news report. It is simply unheard of. To answer the original question about why the video was there, it was there because someone who had knowledge, and was willing to share it, could easily film and publish a tutorial. There were no bureaucratic barriers or any quality standards to interfere with his efforts. No one was going to review it and say, “Sorry we just are not going to publish this.” The power to publish was completely in the hands of the maker of the video. This leads us into the second question.

Does the quality of the video matter? This seemingly simple question is really difficult to answer because it assumes there is an objective definition for quality. The question provides no information on who is determining the meaning of quality. That is the critical piece to this part of the story. This video would never make it in any kind of do-it-yourself media outlet. It was filmed by the guy’s wife and his son was running around with a screwdriver. If the video needed to be professionally produced the barriers to getting it done would quickly exceed the payoff, which in this case appears to be intrinsic satisfaction. Could the maker afford the costs and time of hiring a sitter for his son and a professional camera crew? Not likely. But, could he spend an afternoon with his family filming something he is passionate about? Absolutely. Because the quality is only limited by his standards, the bar for participation is set relatively low. But what about for me, the consumer of the video, did I need something professionally produced? No. Because I did not have to pay for the video I really didn’t care how it was produced. I was more interested in the video’s ability to provide me the information I needed to solve my problem. In fact, I was able to watch several videos on the same subject by different people. It just so happened that the one produced by Milosmommy was the one that worked best for my learning style. From the perspective of solving my problem the quality of the video was

perfect. The value of the video for me was firmly wrapped up in the utility of the information and not based on the quality of the production. This is an example where our traditional taken-for-granted notions of quality vanish and a new meaning, or sense, of quality emerges.

The basic assumptions behind the word quality are rapidly changing. The Flip Ultra video camera is not a high quality camera yet it remains a top selling camera. The MP3 format of music is less superior in sound quality than a host of other options but that has not stopped iTunes and other outlets from selling tracks for quick download and easy playback by users. Quality today seems to say more about flexibility and ease of use. Wired Magazine is calling this phenomenon The Good Enough Revolution. In an article by that name, Robert Capps says, “We now favor flexibility over high fidelity, convenience over features, quick and dirty over slow and polished. Having it here and now is more important than having it perfect” (Capps, 2009). While the article focused on products for sale, the same rules seem to apply, perhaps even more so, when dealing with the free exchange of knowledge. By turning over quality control and production costs to individual users, YouTube can facilitate the rapid dissemination of knowledge and content. Granted, not all content is knowledge on YouTube. This is the same site that plays hosts to the video entitled “Kittens on a Treadmill” and the now infamous Double Rainbow guy. Users determine what they want to upload and viewers determine to view videos that are relevant to them. The power is in the hands of those using the platform. While the shift in power is welcomed by many there is a problem created by this mass production. The problem is organization. How do you organize this massive storehouse of content? This leads to the final question.

Out of the hundreds of millions of videos on the site, how was I able to find the one I needed with just three words in my search? Part of this answer has to do with Google’s amazing

search algorithms which are well beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, the other part of the answer has to do with tagging. Tagging is a technical term where a user can provide some key words to describe content they are putting on the Internet. In the case of the video described above, the user Milosmommy tagged his video with key words when he uploaded the video to YouTube. In addition to tagging, the video maker can also supply a brief description of the video. All of this text content is then available for searching. Searching YouTube for the keyword “Samsung” currently yields about 650,000 results. Searching for “Samsung Capacitor Replacement” returns only 39 including the video I used. The key to making sense out of millions of videos is to allow users to provide context to what they are uploading. They are self-indexing their own content and thereby providing a searchable database. It’s a far more efficient system than having a group of curators trying to organize the content, which at the YouTube scale would be nearly impossible and definitely unsustainable from an economic standpoint.

The lessons I learned from my experience with the video for repairing my television greatly influenced the design of my project. The evaluation would need an easy path to participation and participants would need to have a great deal of flexibility over the type of content they share and the methods by which they participate. Like the video maker, Milosmommy, the willingness to share time and talent seems somewhat proportional to the ease of participation. The collaborative group I was working with in this project expressed interest in using some type of narrative methodology for the evaluation project. Building upon the idea of tagging I was interested to find a way to develop a similar process for participants to add signifying information to their narrative data. Finally, just as I judged the quality of the video by the utility it provided me, the evaluation should be judged by the utility it provides to the participants. The output of the evaluation would be guided by the needs of the collaborative

partners. The three principles that emerged from this experience can be summarized in the following way:

1. Create an easy path to participation.
2. Allow users to “tag” or self-index their input into the project to provide further context and meaning to their information.
3. The output needs to be good enough. The output of the evaluation does not have to conform to quality standards set by the evaluation industry, rather the output needs to provide the collaborative partners enough information to move forward in their planning.

#### Create an Easy Path to Participation

During one of the initial meetings with the IROCK collaborative group in Boise I asked members to comment on their previous experience with evaluation. Several common themes emerged. They expressed frustration with being asked for information as part of the evaluation but then having little or no follow up with how that information was used. The other issue faced by many participants was the lack of sharing and utilizing the information once an evaluation project was completed. As mentioned earlier, the cost of evaluation puts the “ownership” of the final document in the hands of one or a few partners and they may or may not do a good job of sharing the final report. Another common theme identified a disconnect between the recommendations in an evaluation report and action taken by the group. This disconnect led participants into feeling like evaluation is something for the “researchers” to do and use but not something for them. The lesson from my television story is to connect participants to the entire



process of evaluation. Make participation easy, involve them in the sense making process, and ultimately involve them in the production of the final output.

The evaluation environment needs to be collaborative. Participants should feel connected to each phase of the evaluation from design to the final report. Participants would need to be fully engaged. Yochai Benkler summarizes this concept when he talks about contributions to Wikipeida. “The giving, does not merely involve agents parting with something of value, but agents working in cooperation with others to give or produce something of value to all.” (Benkler & Nissenbaum, Commons-based Peer Production and Virtue, 2006, p. 408) This type of collaboration does not have to be limited to technological environments. In fact, this project would involve people interacting with each other face-to-face much more than through technological means. In a therapeutic context, Harlene Anderson speaks to the same type of collaboration when she talks about client and therapist transforming together, “Therapist and client construct something new with each other. The something new is not an outcome or a product at the end of the encounter. It continually emerges throughout the duration of the encounter while at the same time informing it and continuing afterwards. That is, each conversation will be a springboard for future ones.” (Anderson, 2007, p. 52)

The obvious challenge to this type of collaborative process can be the ambiguity involved as the project moves forward. Truly being transparent and open to input means the project can take unexpected turns. However, viewed from a more positive angle you could say the project is open to unexpected new discoveries. The hope was to produce an engaging process that provides participants with an ongoing sense of both giving and receiving thereby tapping into their intrinsic motivation.

### Allow Users to Self-Index Their Content

This lesson is a little more abstract than the others. Giving users the ability to tag content online has played an important role in searching for relevant information on the Internet. However, my interest was less about search and more about an individual's ability to add contextual information to their data. I already knew I would likely be developing some type of narrative study. Many types of narrative research require the researcher to code the data collected. My thought was to turn this process over to participants by having them code their data when they provide it. This would allow users to provide additional contextual elements to the information they are submitting as part of the evaluation. In technological terms this is commonly referred to as metadata. Metadata is data about the data. In the case of this dissertation I was interested in collecting data about the stories participants would submit to the project. Similar to the tags that helped me find the video I needed, I wanted to find a way to use metadata to help participants identify emergent patterns in the submitted narrative information.

### The Output Needs to be Good Enough

The common output of an evaluation project is a final report. It has the usual elements of providing an overview of the situation, information on how data were collected, the design of the evaluation, and a results and/or conclusions section. There are many resources to consult for help on structuring and formatting an evaluation report. For this project the final report structure and formatting would be determined by the collaborative group. They would decide which elements provide them with the most utility for taking action. The television repair video I referenced above would not be considered a quality self-help video by production standards. However, the video has clearly helped hundreds if not thousands of people, like me, repair their

television. From a user perspective the video provided me with exactly what I needed to take the action necessary to solve my issue. Similarly, the intent of the evaluation would be to move members toward action based on what they learned regardless of the format of that learning.

The lesson to learn is to focus on the needs of the community being evaluated and always serve those needs first. The project should include multiple ways for the community to ensure the outputs of the evaluation are enabling them to take action and move forward with their work. Taking a collaborative approach allows room for the experience of the evaluation to be an output in and of itself. In other words, the final report is not going to be the only thing that motivates people to operate differently, discover new possibilities, and take action. Participants will continually change, grow, and take action simply through the act of participation.

## Chapter 4 - Content as Process Rather than Product

The last chapter concluded with the notion that the evaluation process can serve as a motivator of change in and of itself. This notion is congruent with Participatory Action Research. “The participants, whether expert or novice, must do the work of critical self-reflection, examining their own identities, position of power and privilege, and interaction styles, as well as how these continuously impact the research process” (Brydon-Miller, Kral, Maguire, Noffke, & Sabhlok, 2011). Naturally when I encountered the quote above I instantly drew a parallel to the Internet. I could sum up that same sentiment in one word, Wikipedia.

Imagine you were given the task to create an encyclopedia with over 17,000,000 articles and available in over 270 languages. One last thing, while you have a staff of nearly one-hundred-thousand people they are volunteers and choose to work on what they want, when they want (Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 2011). How long would this take? Is it even possible? This is essentially what Wikipedia has accomplished in its short ten year life. The numbers sound impressive but are all those articles usable? In 2005 Nature magazine compared Wikipedia to Encyclopedia Britannica. In the articles that were reviewed they found 162 errors in Wikipedia and 123 in Encyclopedia Britannica (Giles, 2005). The two sources were actually quite close especially when you consider the vastly different models they are built upon. Many focus on the fact that Wikipedia had more errors; however, the more important feature is that if Wikipedia wanted to correct those errors they could have that done within minutes and anyone accessing the site would have the most updated version. Encyclopedia Britannica could never pull off such a feat without major expenses. Wikipedia will never be “done.” It is a constant work in progress because anyone can edit any content. As our knowledge changes so does the encyclopedia. The

content is virtual which has many advantages. It allows for the constant negotiation and re-negotiation of meaning. The content becomes a process rather than a product.

Wikipedia is obviously not the first project to utilize the concept of multiple people working in a self-organized way on a large project. Linus Torvald will go down in history as a pioneering leader (although he may not use that word) in the concept of open source software development. Linus Torvald started the Linux operating system project with some very basic principles as summarized by Eric Raymond in *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, “Release early and often, delegate everything you can, and be open to the point of promiscuity” (Raymond, 2000). Eric Raymond creates an interesting metaphorical device to distinguish between industrial-age management of software releases and the post-industrial-age of software development. He compares traditional models with Cathedral building, slow methodical planning and placement to build a masterpiece. This is contrasted with the Bazaar style of development where somehow differing views and agendas blend into a coherent system.

In traditional models of production the producers and the consumers are often two very distinct groups and there is little if any interaction between the two. The open source mode of production completely shatters this model and blurs the division between consumer and producer. The producer and consumer division becomes more indicative about a current person’s state in relation to the product rather than a statement about the person in and of themselves. For example, someone reading a Wikipedia article is a consumer. However, if they decide to improve the article they quickly shift into the role of a producer. In this way the product boundaries are continually being redefined by the process rather than becoming static as a finished product object.

Wikipedia also capitalizes on a major fundamental shift in the division of labor. The standards for “good” content are continually being negotiated by the group, or to use a more recent term, the “crowd.” Jeff Howe, coined the term Crowdsourcing when he released a book by the same name. In the book, he talks about phenomenon of large network meritocracies, where the final product is pursued without regard for who is contributing to its production (Howe, 2008). There are a growing number of sites that are moving the Wikipedia model, which is largely based on volunteer input, into a new economic model where individuals can self-organize to solve problems for money. The most notable recent experiment included video rental giant Netflix. Netflix offered a one million dollar prize to the person or team that could make a ten percent improvement to the algorithm used to provide renters with recommendations. A Netflix subscriber can rent movies and then rate their like or dislike of that movie. Netflix then uses this information and runs it through an algorithm to recommend additional movies to the subscriber based on their likes and dislikes. The challenge was to increase the accuracy of this algorithm by ten percent. The contest lasted nearly two years and was finally won by team that called themselves Chaos (Van Buskirk, 2009). The contest had 51,051 participants that formed 41,305 teams representing 186 countries (Netflix, 2009). While a million dollar prize may seem like a large amount of money, it is nothing when you see the amount of labor these one million dollars purchased. This goes back to Howe’s point of the final product being pursued without regard to its production. Netflix paid for the solution, in essence, the failed time and efforts of the other participants cost them nothing. There are many questions to consider as to whether or not this is fair, just or sustainable, but it is interesting for sure. It has provided one of the first well documented pieces of evidence that, “Better solutions come from unorganized people who are allowed to organize organically” (Van Buskirk, 2009).

Currently Wikipedia has only a small paid staff. As mentioned earlier the majority of the content is being produced by volunteers. Volunteers are receiving enough intrinsic value to outweigh the lack of monetary value. This leads to another key concept that seems to make the whole thing work. People care about the content and are given the tools to exercise their care. People do “vandalize” articles, making false entries on purpose. However, there are many people voluntarily monitoring for this activity and they can revert to a previous version very quickly. It is the care for content combined with the freedom within the “commons” structure of Wikipedia that seems to keep vandals in check. The word commons is used purposefully to provide an alternative to the notion that “Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all” (Hardin, 1968), a central theme in a 1968 article about over population entitled, *The Tragedy of the Commons*. Hardin provided a hypothetical example of how cattle ranchers would inevitably overgraze land if the land was common to all. The addition of one more cow positively affects a rancher because all the proceeds of that animal go to that single rancher. The negative effects, overgrazing, is shared across all the ranchers thereby reducing the negative effect to any single rancher. “Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit – in a world that is limited” (Hardin, 1968). How has Wikipedia not fallen into the trap of this tragedy? The answer to that question is beyond the scope of this project. However, the answer may have to do with the virtual nature of the product. Unlike land where overgrazing is difficult to undo, in a virtual world any negative effects can be undone with a simple click. In addition, virtualized information appears to have such large limits, if there are indeed limits, that you can consider it limitless. Many economic and social theories conceive of the world and its resource as limited. In *The Tragedy of the Commons*, the ranchers must choose between caring for the cattle and caring for the land. In the case of Wikipedia, as the content

grows and develops so too does our capacity to store and organize it. It would be like telling the hypothetical ranchers that the size of their herd of cattle is limited only by their care and commitment to the task. It is unclear at this time, but it is possible that the mass cooperation we are witnessing on the Internet is only possible when dealing in information goods as opposed to tangible goods. Information can be virtualized rather easily, but the same cannot be said for tangible items at this point in time.

Wikipedia and other crowdsourced projects provided a few additional principles that influenced the design of this dissertation project. Participants would need to interact with the information in all phases of the project, providing them the opportunity to refine and even redefine the information. In addition, the concept of crowdsourcing is built upon the principle that people will self-select tasks that interest them. Finally, the Wikipedia example shows that people will take care of things they care about, if they are given the opportunity and tools to exercise that care. These principles were essential in the development of the project in Boise and they can be summarized as follows:

1. Content as process not product.
2. Capitalize on the crowd.
3. People Take Care of What They Care About.

#### Content as Process not Product

How is a project summarized? If someone wishes to find out about a particular evaluation project they would likely be referred to the final report. It is the knowledge product that is supposed to analyze and synthesize the information gathered during the inquiry. This seems like a logical notion but the collaborative partners in Boise mentioned that far too often



the final report goes unread and in many cases the recommendations go unused. The hope was to find a way to engage participants in the sense making process and make that process available for others to see. In addition, we began thinking about the final report I as a representation of current thinking, and something that could be changed over time as their understanding and knowledge base grew.

One key aim of the project was to blur the lines between participant and researcher by fostering a participatory environment where everyone involved could share the responsibilities of both participant and researcher. This would increase the experiential knowledge base in the community. More specifically, people are moved to action by way of experience more than they are by way of reading a report. The primary focus was on the participatory process.

### Capitalize on the Crowd

The recent phenomenon of crowdsourcing is showing promise in terms of producing highly relevant solutions to complex problems. We are conditioned to think that experts are our best source for solutions. However, there is growing evidence that sharing problem information with a diverse audience can yield innovative solutions from people operating outside of their area of expertise (Lakhani, Jeppesen, Lohse, & Panetta, 2008). This principle could be incorporated by including both service providers and the young adults they serve in every aspect of the evaluation project. Several of the collaborative members in Boise mentioned that young adults are included in terms of gathering information but they are often excluded from the analyzing and sense making aspects of evaluation. This evaluation project focused first and foremost on people as members of a common community, their roles as service providers and young adults were secondary.

Service providers orient to community problems differently than the young adults they serve and vice versa. By engaging both groups first as members of the same community it was hoped they could begin to see the world through each other's eyes, providing them with some new perspectives on how to articulate and deal with the issues they face. Participants were encouraged to think about opening the project up to other community members as well, like church groups, store owners, school staff, etc. If the process is visible to others they can choose their level of participation

### People Take Care of What They Care About

The key element that seems to hold Wikipedia together is that people care about the content they create. Different people care about different things. By opening up the project to allow large amounts of active participation the project will have many different watchful and caring eyes on the content. This means that the focus of the evaluation needs to be driven by those most impacted by the evaluation. Engaging the community to focus on the issues most important to them and allowing them to make sense of what they find will likely result in more participation. There will ultimately need to be limits on what issues get explored but those limits can be put in place by the community members. The goal was to collaboratively build an evaluation structure that the community can sustain on their own once I am no longer working with them.

## **Section 2 – The Social Construction Orientation**

### **Chapter 5 - My Introduction to Social Construction**

Social Construction as a body of knowledge was something I discovered relatively recently. However, the concepts of social construction were very familiar to me because one could argue that the Internet is the world's largest ongoing social construction experiment. My multiple fascinations with the Internet, psychology and sociology led me to explore options to continue my education. I already had my Master's in Psychology and I was looking to expand my skill set by getting an Master's in Business Administration with an emphasis on technology. The more I explored various programs the more I discovered I was less interested in the actual technology and more interested in the impacts technology is having on us as individuals and as a society. My fascination was with the underlying philosophical implications. I soon realized I would likely be most happy in a doctoral program doing some type of inquiry. However, I knew I would not be able to quit my job and go to school full time. That was when several rather serendipitous events happened.

As I was exploring options to further my education, my employer was looking for a way to evaluate some of our work. In addition, I had recently discovered the Taos-Tilburg Ph.D. program after reading some material on Appreciative Inquiry. The timing was perfect. The program would allow me to stay at work, and my work had a project that needed to get done. Intuitively, I also knew that I wanted to take something other than a traditional approach to evaluation. The evaluation was for a group of collaborative partners in our Boise Idaho office. The collaborative partners, made up of both public and private service providers, served youth that were aging out of the foster care system. Their goal was to help these youth successfully transition into adulthood. The more I looked for alternative ways of inquiry the more I stumbled

upon the term social construction. I was very comfortable learning about social construction because many of the concepts resonated with the experiences I described in the previous four chapters. I felt as though I was reading about the Internet. Social construction would become the theoretical backdrop for this dissertation project.

## Chapter 6 - What is Social Construction?

What is social construction? This is a natural first question anyone would ask when hearing about social construction. It was the first question I asked. However, it turns out to be a very difficult question to answer. Vivian Burr states that, “Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be” (Burr, 2003, p. 3). This does not necessarily constitute an answer to what social construction is, rather it is hinting toward what it is not. This appears to be a common tact many writers take in trying to define social construction. Ian Hacking in the book *The Social Construction of What*, also urges readers to resist seeking a definition by stating “On the contrary, we first need to confront the point of social construction analyses. Don’t ask for the meaning, ask what’s the point” (Hacking, 1999, p. 5). In the book entitled, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, Ken Gergen offers something close to a definition when talking about social construction and the self. “It is not that social constructionist ideas annihilate self, truth, objectivity, science, and morality. Rather, it is the way in which we have understood and practiced them that is thrown into question. In the end, social constructionism allows us to reconstitute the past in far more promising ways” (Gergen K. J., 1999, p. 33). Guba and Lincoln refer to social construction as “a belief system that is virtually opposite to that of science; a kind of belief system that is often referred to as a paradigm” (Guba & Lincoln, 1990, p. 43). One quickly realizes that seeking a definition of social construction is a futile effort. However, this begs a further question. Why is social construction so hard to define?

I believe it is easier to explain why social construction is hard to define rather than to actually define social construction. Social construction, as spoken about in the citations above, is critical in nature. And, taking a critical stance cannot be achieved without being critical of some

other thing. This places social construction in a precarious position in that it can only exist in relation to that which it is critical of, and seemingly ceases to exist by itself. Social construction is referred to as being postmodern. Again, this term postmodern shows its relation to the modern. Lyotard defined postmodern as “Incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 2002, p. xxiv). It seems to me that many writers and pioneers in the field of social construction were seeking to be legitimized within the academic world which historically has been dominated by a more positivist “one-Truth” version of reality. I came to this realization because my own desire to define social construction was fueled by a more fundamental question of how I was going to conduct “research” from a social construction paradigm. I didn’t just want to conduct any research, but obviously I wanted the research to be accepted as legitimate. Taking that question further I began to wonder who it was that I was seeking my legitimacy from. I was seeking to earn a Ph.D. in social science therefore I obviously want my research to be accepted as legitimate by the academic community. That is when I realized that social construction is caught in a catch

22. Rhetorically speaking, why would a paradigm that is in opposition to the dominant paradigm want to be legitimized by that dominant paradigm? It does not make sense to define social construction within a paradigm that treats truth as singular, objective and discoverable. While it may be difficult to define social construction it is certainly easy to say that social construction does not treat truth in the same way. Ken and Mary Gergen write, “It is not whether an account is true in some absolute or god’s eye view that matters so much as the results for our lives that follow from taking avowals of truth seriously. There can be many truths, depending on community tradition, but as the constructionist asks, what happens to us – for good or ill – as we honor one as opposed to another account?” (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p. 158). Here is where, in my opinion, social construction seems to offer something “different than” as opposed to “critical

of” a positivist paradigm. Social construction is hard to define because of the context in which the definition is requested. In many cases the asking is coming within the context of academia, which historically has been dominated by the positivist paradigm. The language and tools are inadequate to describe social construction within a positivist paradigm. This is similar to the blogging and journalism issue discussed in chapter two. It doesn’t make sense to compare a blogger to a journalist because the fundamental orientation to information is so wildly different. Similarly, it doesn’t make sense to compare social construction, which orients to multiple truths that emerge through social process, with a paradigm that sees truth as singular and discoverable through observation.

Even when social construction can be examined as something “different than” as opposed to “critical of” there is still a fundamental paradox that makes it difficult to define social construction. The paradox is created by the notion that social construction is open to many truths or many realities. Therefore, when one begins a sentences such as “Social construction is,” everything that follows the “is” is considered to be just one perspective and thereby cannot be seen as definitive. It would seem that social construction can never be defined in a definitive way, as a singular truth, rather social construction must be defined by the context in which it is being used. From a positivist perspective this can be viewed as a weakness or even as double speak. I must admit that I had the same reaction when I first started to read about social construction. It sounded like a fancy way to say inquiry-by-the-seat-of-your-pants. While it would be antithetical to social construction to say what it is, with any authority, I believe it is entirely possible to define social construction within the context in which it is being used for inquiry.

Why is it important to define social construction at all? The definition of social

construction, specifically within the context it is being used, helps to transmit to others, especially those impacted by the inquiry, with a sense of the utility of social construction. This is an important point. The utility of a traditional research paradigm can be summarized by stating that they are built upon experiments that lead to identification of causal factors that can be replicated and applied in the future to similar situations (Cook & Campbell, 1979). That is an important utility and it can be useful if you are looking to produce something that can be used in a universal way. Scientific experimentation from a positivist lens provides us with descriptions of phenomenon that have a sense of constancy and predictability. That may be both the positivist's strength and weakness. It is a strength because it allows for the codification and transmission of knowledge and information. It is a weakness because it has the potential to establish a "status quo" that may continue to be upheld long after its usefulness. It would be logical at this point to restate the need for something like social construction to take a "critical" stance toward the established status quo. However, and I am certain some social construction writers will disagree with me, the critical stance emerges as a by-product of social construction and not necessarily as a function of social construction. Later, I will explain this idea in more detail.

What then is the utility of social construction? Earlier I used the term "description" to comment on what positivist inquiry produces. A description of a phenomenon is different from understanding what a phenomenon means. In my view, social construction has tremendous utility in engaging multiple stakeholders in the process of meaning making or sense making. It is in the process of interpreting the meaning of "observations," to use a traditional term, that the construction of reality or truth takes place. The basic premise of multiple-realities positions social construction to be most useful in situations where multiple



interpretations abound. It is in the process of meaning making where power, privilege, and many other social dynamics come into play.

I developed a simple, intentionally sarcastic, thought experiment to illustrate the utility of a social construction paradigm. Imagine if you will a strict positivist and me engaging in a conversation. I hold in my hand a brick and I release it from my grip and naturally the brick falls to the ground. I ask my positivist friend to tell me what caused the brick to hit the ground. He replies, “Gravity.” For good measure I ask, “Did I cause gravity?” He chuckles and replies, “No.” Now, I take that same brick, this time holding it over his head and release it. As my friend turns to me in anger I simply reply, “Don’t be mad at me be mad at gravity.” While I did not cause gravity I did position the brick and I was responsible for releasing it. So the natural question is, why? Was it an act of aggression or hostility? Was it an honest mistake? Why would I choose to position and release the brick in that spot at that time? These questions are not inquiring into the phenomenon at the action level (the falling brick). Rather, these questions represent a probe into the meaning behind the action. While this may seem overly simplistic, I think of social construction, and social science in general, as dealing with the meaning of things rather than a description of what is taking place. When looking at why the brick fell to the ground, describing the gravitational force acting on the brick seemed adequate. Gravity is what made it hit the ground. The description of the event can be tested and verified many times over. There is some force that seems to pull the brick to the ground rather than leave it suspended in air. The phenomenon of the brick falling appears to have stability and constancy to it. However, such a description fails to be adequate to explain the meaning behind why I would drop the brick on my friend’s head. The important shift here is that now the phenomenon under inquiry is not the falling brick, but rather the position and timing of the release. The phenomenon is a

dynamic local phenomenon specific to this instance and involving multiple relational interactions. The question shifts from “what happened?” to “why did you do that?” Why descriptions are inherently unstable and often change over time. Think of something you did, or something someone did to you ten years ago. Think about what it meant to you then and what it means to you now. Are the two meanings different?

Taking a social construction approach to inquiry does not mean all information obtained through positivist means should be abandoned. Rather, taking a social construction approach would focus more on how a group uses that information, and other relational dynamics, to make meaning from the information. The positivist perspective sees a world that exists with inherent qualities that can be discovered, and once discovered inescapable. “A truth is absolute if it states a fundamental, universal, and inescapable fact, a fact that holds no matter what other facts might also exist” (Machan, 2004, p. vii). And, the assumption is that the mind can obtain an objective view of the world (Machan, 2004). A social constructionist sees a world that is continually created and recreated through social interaction. We do not create meaning by penetrating the minds of others to understand what they know. As Ken Gergen puts it, “Rather, understanding is a relational achievement; it depends on coordinated actions – and most frequently, coordination as specified within a tradition” (Gergen K. J., 1999, p. 147).

There may also be internal conversation and/or interaction, but that too is a form of social process. “We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience. Furthermore, there is an inevitable historical and sociocultural dimension to this construction. We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth (Scwandt, 2003, p. 197).” In this light social construction

inquiry would focus on how a group interacts and makes meaning from information against the backdrop of their shared understanding and practices. This last point regarding shared understanding is critical because it addresses the common misunderstanding that social construction provides a relativist perspective where “anything goes.” Constructions are not emerging from nothing, they are emerging within a context and while that context may change over time it continually sets the boundaries for how new information and new experiences get socially constructed into the fabric of a community. The backdrop or context of a community is made up of many interactions based on many types of information and experience, including positivist information and descriptions of experience. This information is not simply dismissed as irrelevant, instead it holds great relevance for how future information will be interpreted.

Earlier I said I would explain further what I meant by the critical nature of social construction being a by-product rather than function. Taking a critical stance toward the “status quo,” as a function or prescriptive behavior, places a value judgment on the “status quo.” Ian Hacking writes, “But most people who use the social construction idea enthusiastically want to criticize, change, or destroy some *X* that they dislike in the established order of things (Hacking, 1999, p. 7).” In some cases a deliberate disruption of the status quo may indeed be needed, such as with the practice of slavery and racism. I would contend that the deliberate act is part of the social construction process, rather than a function of the social construction stance. In the case of slavery, there were many people who felt it was wrong and they wanted to end the practice. However, their viewpoint was continually invalidated by the status quo. It is in the process of testing and modifying our concepts that a new idea emerges, in this case, in stark contrast to the status quo. In essence, it is the process of social construction in action that is producing the critical stance. This may seem to be a futile exercise in semantics. However, I

believe the distinction is important.

Social construction is more than a critical stance toward positivism, or any other “-ism” for that matter. It may also be helpful to think of it as more than just “different than.” Perhaps social construction can be seen as an overarching umbrella that embraces multiple ways of knowing. In a very simplistic sense, many science experiments from a positivist stance study effects in an effort to determine cause. This assumes, ontologically that stuff exists and it can be known (epistemology) by developing methods to know it. This also assumes some type of order or linear connection. The basic premise is that stuff exists outside of us, out in the world, that we can discover and develop ways to predictably interact with it. I contend that social construction takes the stance that our ontological assumptions greatly influence our epistemological notions which ultimately shape the methods we develop and select to know what we know. Furthermore, social construction is less concerned with cause and effect and more concerned with how things emerge. I use the term emergence in context of complexity science where emergence is seen as “A new property or behavior, which appears due to non-linear interactions within the system; emergence may be considered the ‘product’ or by-product of the system (Dobrescu & Purcarea, 2011, p. 82).” Where does this leave social construction in relation to ontology, epistemology, and methodology? For this project, taking a social construction approach could be equated to taking a multi-ontological approach. As expressed in the umbrella metaphor I used earlier, I see social construction as a “meta-paradigm” that situates the inquirer(s) in a position that would be, from an empirical point of view, pre-hypothesis. There is not a hypothesis to be tested. If a hypothesis develops it would likely emerge as a product or by-product of the interactive inquiry. In essence, the inquiry starts by understanding and honoring the current conditions, while knowing that the inquiry itself is

introducing a new condition. And finally, some intentional new conditions may be introduced all for the purpose of seeing what emerges.

This is where we can revisit the idea of utility. The notion of utility becomes important because the patterns and knowledge that emerge will be used or discarded according to their utility to the group. I use the term utility to represent a local and historical sense of usefulness within a socio-cultural context. This is different from a positivist notion of a truth that is meant to remain true across multiple contexts and time. The end of social construction inquiry simply represents the beginning of new possibilities and future meaning making.

Social construction is difficult to define because it is not something that can be defined in an end-all-be-all way. Rather, when taking a social construction approach to inquiry one must define social construction within the context of the inquiry. The next two chapters provide a theoretical overview of how this project incorporated a social construction orientation to inquiry. In addition, the next two chapters build further upon the notion of a multi-ontological approach, its usefulness for social inquiry, and its relationship to complexity theory.

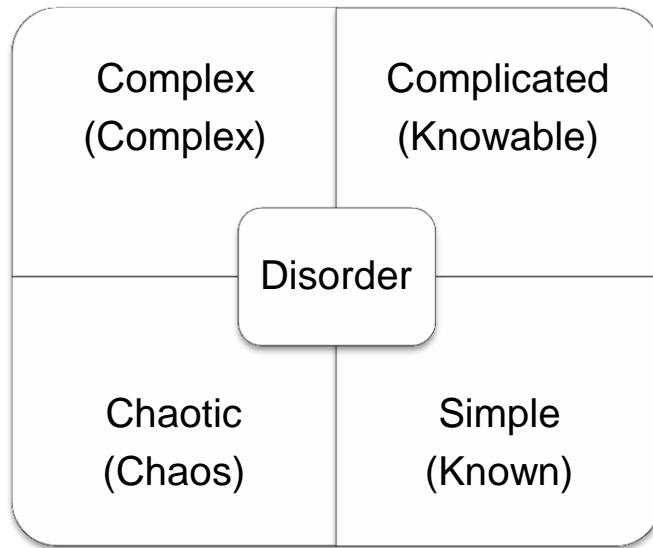
## Chapter 7 - A Multi-Ontological Approach to Social Issues

Ontology is generally thought of as a branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature and relations of being. Ontology explores what kinds of things exist, what properties they have, and how they relate to other things (Hofweber, 2005). It is the relational aspect specifically within ontology that I believe social construction has much to offer. Dian Marie Hosking and Rene Bouwen identify a “relational-constructionist” approach in a paper they co-authored about organizational learning, defining their approach as theorizing the processes of social construction (Hosking & Bouwen, 2000). While they make reference to a “relational ontology,” I would argue that they are talking about the ontological process as a whole and not a specific type of ontology (Hosking & Bouwen, 2000, p. 129). There are strong parallels between knowledge as process rather than product (discussed in chapter four) and the concept of ontology as a process rather than product. As outlined earlier, Wikipedia offers a way to conceptualize knowledge as a constantly changing by-product of continual interaction rather than a fixed thing that should be free from further scrutiny. Science within a positivist framework assumes an ontology that is consistent and universal. Science within a social construction framework, as outlined in this project, assumes there are multiple ontological assumptions at play in any given social interaction. The Cynefin framework developed by Cynthia Kurtz and Dave Snowden is a multi-ontological framework for decision and sense making (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). The Cynefin framework was a central part of the sense making process in this dissertation project.

I first encountered the term multi-ontology in a paper by Dave Snowden entitled, *Multi-Ontology Sense Making: A New Simplicity in Decision Making* (Snowden D. J., Multi-ontology sense making: a new simplicity in decision making, 2005). In the article he talks about order and un-order as two types of ontology that require very different approaches to address issues and

provide interventions (Snowden D. J., *Multi-ontology sense making: a new simplicity in decision making*, 2005). The term is also used in a book entitled, *The third lens: multi-ontology sense-making and strategic decision-making* by Mika Aaltonen. This book also highlights an ontological duality similar to Snowden's by contrasting order and chaos (Aaltonen, 2007). However, Aaltonen goes further to define a third ontology, or the third lens, as complexity. "In complex systems, there is order, but it is emergent, it arises from the local interaction of actors, each of whom behaves according to their own principles, logic and knowledge" (Aaltonen, 2007, p. xvii). Similar to the relational-constructionist approach discussed earlier there seems to be a focus on process and emergence. The relational-constructionist approach does not go so far as to define the types of ontology but both approaches at least acknowledge that there is more than a single ontology and this requires us to rethink our epistemological and methodological choices (Aaltonen, 2007).

In a foundational paper entitled *The New Dynamics of Strategy: Sense-Making in a Complex and Complicated World*, David Snowden and Cynthia Kurtz introduced a framework for sense-making in a multi-ontological world called the Cynefin framework (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). The word Cynefin (pronounced ku-nevin) is a Welsh word for habitat. The framework is considered a sense-making framework and as such it is a framework that can be talked about conceptually but must be constructed locally and historically to provide meaning to those who use it. Simply put, there is no claim that the Cynefin framework "exists" outside of the context in which it is being used. The framework has five major components and is typically depicted as a two-by-two matrix with a component of disorder in the center (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). A simple reconstruction can be viewed below. The headings are the current terms used by Snowden and the headings in parenthesis are the headings originally used in the article.



The framework can be thought of as being split vertically to denote the two major domains of order and un-order. These are the primary domains and each of those has sub domains. On the right side which ontologically represents order you have that which is known and that which is knowable. These two distinctions provide a boundary between simple observations, such as the sun appears in the sky and more complicated observations, such as the sun rotates around the earth. The left side of the framework ontologically represents un-order. Here the focus is less on how things are known and more on how they interact and relate. The complex domain deals with the emergence of patterns that can be utilized. The chaotic domain deals with instability or seemingly random patterns. The center domain of disorder is used to represent competing representations of reality based on different ontological assumptions. When used in sense making it is assumed this domain will shrink as participants break disagreements into smaller fragments of meaning. “The Cynefin framework is based on three ontological states (namely, order, complexity and chaos) and a variety of epistemological options in all three of those states” (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003).



I will provide a brief overview of each domain of the Cynefin framework as I understand it and used it this dissertation project. There are four primary domains; Simple, Complicated, Complex, and Chaos, and a fifth domain entitled disorder. The simple and complicated domains reside on the order side of the framework. The simple domain represents the area where cause and effect are observable by most, hence the name “Known” in the early version of the framework (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). The ability to codify a set of instructions is rather simple in this domain. When put in the context of decision making, Snowden and Boone identify the mode of action as Sense-Categorize-Respond (Snowden & Boone, A Leader's Framework for Decision Making, 2007). In the simple domain problems fit within simple categories and a response becomes almost rote. Answers should be readily apparent to almost anyone.

The complicated domain is very similar to the simple domain with the exception that cause and effect may be more difficult to ascertain. If the simple domain can be summed up by the phrase “everyone knows the answer” then the complicated domain would be summed up by the phrase “experts know the answer.” In this domain the course of action would be Sense-Analyze-Respond (Snowden & Boone, A Leader's Framework for Decision Making, 2007). Referring back to the earlier version of the Cynefin Framework this domain used to be called “Knowable” (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). It builds upon the ontology of an ordered-world and many positivists would likely find this domain to be in their comfort zone.

The complex domain moves us into the un-order side of the framework. The word un-order is used to describe something that is neither ordered nor absent of order. I prefer to use the term emergent-patterns when referring to this domain. Snowden and Boone would describe the course of action in this domain as Probe-Sense-Respond (Snowden & Boone, A Leader's Framework for Decision Making, 2007). In this domain there are many answers, all valid and all

likely to have varying degrees of utility. Determining if a course of action was useful is typically done in retrospect. This domain offers little by way of predictive analysis. A “probe” into this domain allows one to enter the domain so they can get a “sense” of what is going on and then “respond.”

The domain of chaos is where things are happening that require immediate action. This domain could be thought of as the crisis intervention domain. The course of action here would be Act-Sense-Respond (Snowden & Boone, A Leader's Framework for Decision Making, 2007). The circumstances are changing so rapidly that searching for the “right” solution would be futile and waste valuable time.

The final domain is disorder. This domain is used to denote topics that do not fit the other domains. These topics are typically politically and/or emotionally charged topics. When working with a group to construct a framework this domain should shrink over time as the group begins to understand the issue at a deeper level. One way to address items in this domain is to break them down into smaller parts that can then be placed onto the framework.

It is worth repeating that talking about the framework conceptually is very different than using the framework in practice. From the descriptions above one could make the assumption that the boundaries between domains are fixed and there are certain ways people would categorize items within the framework. Snowden and Kurtz made it explicitly clear that is not a categorization framework, but rather a sense-making framework (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003, p. 468). In practice, participants would need to identify the boundaries of the framework. There are a variety of group exercises that can be used to define the boundaries. The important feature is that no two Cynefin Frameworks will ever be alike. Each time the framework is utilized it is constructed by the group using it at that time. This is a very powerful feature in my opinion in

that it offers an interactional framework to externalize the multi-ontological assumptions taking place during sense-making. Groups are not limited to creating a single framework either. In the case of this dissertation project the service providers and young adults created their own frameworks as respective groups and then came together to discuss how and why they created it in the way they did. It provided each group the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of the other.

For this project, which will be outlined in detail in the Case Study section, the groups used clustered elements of their own stories to place on the framework. The framework boundaries get defined as the group negotiates the placement of items on the framework. As was recommended to me by Cynthia Kurtz, I started with the names of the domains in four corners with no lines drawn to define boundaries. In this way the group does not waste time over a boundary dispute, instead they can focus on a more gradient placement. Once all the items are placed on the framework then participants are engaged to identify the boundary points between domains. These lines do not have to be linear. The important issue is that the meaning is in constant negotiation between the members of the group. Together they construct the framework and the context in which the framework emerges.

The Cynefin framework is a very useful tool for making explicit the ontological assumptions people and/or groups have about a particular issue. It is also important to note that an individual person may have multiple views on a particular topic based on the context in which they are experiencing the topic. Understanding that we have multiple identities is just as important as understanding the concept of multiple realities. Our identities have ontological assumptions that are not always consistent. For example, I may view the topic of discipline very differently as a parent than as an employee of some company. In addition to multiple identities

we must also take into account the local and historical nature of context. The Cynefin framework is not intended to provide a fixed view of reality but rather a snapshot in time that can be used to compare with other snapshots to explore patterns and trace movement.

The utility of the framework is in its ability to assist individuals and/or groups in making decisions that take diverse viewpoints into consideration. The primary, and stated, purpose of the Cynefin framework is for decision making (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). This notion of utility is consistent with how I have been framing social construction. Traditional more positivists approaches to inquiry operate under an assumption that things exist out in the world and they can be discovered and that we can learn about them and understand their “true” nature. It is common to ask about the “accuracy” of the information when examining research from a positivist perspective. The term accuracy is often used when probing the validity of a study. Here again, we must ask, “Accurate according to what?” What is the accuracy based on? This assumes that the knowledge is fixed and has properties irrespective of our understanding of those properties. Even if we were to say this assumption is true we must still ask, what is our capacity to understand those properties and is our understating simply an understanding of the properties themselves or some representation of those properties? If it is the latter, we understand the properties through our representations, then we must ask if can we ever know the “true” nature of those properties? If we change our orientation from a world that exists outside of us to an orientation where the world is a mix of interactions, constantly co-evolving the world itself, then we can bypass many of the philosophical and paradoxical landmines in the field of social science. In this way, the value of information and knowledge is not based on its accuracy or validity, instead it is based on its utility in that local historical moment. Furthermore, the value in the utility is not a fixed value

but a perceived value by the person or group at the time. The value of information can change overtime as new information emerges. I believe utilizing a framework like the Cynefin framework can help maximize utility by providing all participants an opportunity to externalize their ontological assumptions around a particular topic. Reaching a shared understanding of an issue becomes an important first step prior to considering solutions or making decisions. I used the term “shared understanding” in contrast to consensus. The goal is not necessarily to reach consensus, and in many cases waiting for consensus could actually reinforce status-quo behavior. When I use the term shared understanding, I am denoting that participants are aware of the multiple viewpoints of a particular issue even if they disagree. At the end of the day, the power structure in place may still make the final decision but in this way they will make that decision in plain sight of all participants. If there is an imbalance of power that imbalance will be highlighted in this process. The impacts of a decision can be understood at a deeper level and it is much harder to dismiss those who may be impacted negatively. Consensus on the other hand denotes that all involved agree with a particular decision. Unfortunately, this can sometimes disenfranchise those impacted negatively by labeling them as “not willing to get onboard with everyone else.” Consensus is rooted in the notion of a singular truth or solution. In the case of this dissertation project the social service providers were ultimately responsible for making any programmatic changes. However, they desired an opportunity to understand how their decisions will impact the young adults they serve, and even more so, wanted to base their decisions on input from the young adults.

Employing a framework that encompasses multiple ontologies is helpful, but what goes into the framework? How does the framework get created? The construction of a framework is a useful way to externalize the sense-making process. However, there must be

information upon which the sense-making is based. There are a variety of practices to elicit information to generate a Cynefin framework. David Snowden's company Cognitive Edge offers several methods for developing material that could be used to generate a framework (Cognitive Edge, 2007). Cynthia Kurtz also offers a variety of methods that incorporate gathering information from multiple perspectives in her book *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization* (Kurtz C. , Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization, 2009). For the purpose of this dissertation I will focus specifically on narrative data which was used for this project.

Narrative data could include a broad spectrum of narrative information. For this project a specific type of story was desired as the data. Story in this context is specific to the lived-raw- experience of the participants. For this project, we sought out stories that could be told in a non- performance based fashion. It could be argued that all story-telling is performance, however the distinction being made here is that there are stories people tell as part of a dramatic performance and then there are stories people share between friends. For this project the interest was in the latter. Stories have been used for many years as way to bring a sense of order to the many experiences of life by adding context and meaning to the experiences (Bal, 1997). The focus on narrative in this project focuses on both the stories content as well as the discursive nature of the story and how that story shapes the meaning of the issues the project group wanted to explore. The service providers developed some initial questions they were interested in exploring and those questions became the story-eliciting questions used in the data collection aspect of the project. In addition to collecting stories, participants were asked questions about the stories they told. This important feature allows the story teller to provide additional context to their story (Kurtz C. , Working with Stories in Your Community or

Organization, 2009). This concept is very similar to the concept of tags discussed in chapter three entitled “When Good Enough is All You Need.” This additional metadata can be structured to provide for easy aggregation analysis and pattern detection. This important aspect incorporates quantitative analysis into the inquiry project. Engaging participants in a large group sense-making process further involves them in the meaning making of their combined stories. Taking a multi-ontology approach to inquiry allows for the inquiry process to develop epistemological and methodological practices from a variety of ontological stances in an effort to maximize the utility of the inquiry for the group.

## Chapter 8 - Social Construction, Complexity Theory, and the Internet

In reviewing the literature for this dissertation I found many parallels between complexity theory, social construction and the emerging practices on the Internet. The common thread I found between them was that they are dealing with similar types of systems, namely, complex adaptive systems. Complex adaptive systems involve many components, or agents, that learn and adapt through interaction, often non-linear interaction (Holland, 2006). Earlier I wrote about how Hosking and Bouwen described relational-constructionism as theorizing the process of social construction. Similarly, John Miller in his book *Complex Adaptive Systems: An Introduction*, describes studying complex systems as studying in-between the usual scientific boundaries (Miller, 2007). Social construction and complexity theory share many similarities in their orientation to interaction. The Internet is robust with interaction and can arguably be called the largest social complex adaptive system on our planet. At the heart of all inquiry is a desire to understand and act in response to that understanding. Simply put, most inquiry seems to explore a problem in effort to understand and/or affect some type of change. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber provided a name for problems arising in complex social systems in a 1973 article where they coined the term “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Rittel and Weber saw societal problems, or what we could easily call complex adaptive system problems, as a different type of problem than those found in traditional science (Rittel & Webber, 1973). “As distinguished from problems in the natural sciences, which are definable and separable and may have solutions that are findable, the problems of governmental planning – and especially those of social or policy planning – are ill-defined; and they rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution (Not “solution.” Social problems are never solved. At best they



are only re-solved - over and over again.)” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). They went on to identify ten key characteristics of wicked problems which I have reproduced below:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a “one-shot operation”; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem’s resolution.
10. The planner has no right to be wrong.

Many items in this list are compatible with the social construction ideas presented in this dissertation. This list speaks to both the multiple interpretations of a problem as well as the potential to have multiple solutions. Item number three speaks to the aspect of utility in that solutions are not endpoints but rather they are judged by the utility they provide in the context of the problem. Item seven refers to the unique nature of each social issue. Item eight can be interpreted to represent the notion that no issue finds itself absent of context. Item nine is similar

to the issue of ontology determining epistemology and influencing the selection of methodology. The way someone orients to a problem will influence how they approach finding a solution. I believe it is useful to distinguish between wicked problems and more tame problems. It is also useful to distinguish that different approaches are needed to learn about, describe, and intervene on a problem depending on the type of problem. Social science studies social systems, and inherent in social systems are multiple agents acting with some independence within an interdependent system that continually adapts as the interactions unfold.

I believe the Internet is completely changing the way we conceive of information which is why there are so many parallels as I described in the previous section on the Internet. For centuries we have seen information as a product inseparable from its physical manifestation. Something written on a stone tablet was forever fixed to that tablet. Moveable type introduced the ability to make multiple copies of information. At the time, that was a major revolution in the information industry. However, printing and distribution carried with it tremendous costs and the ability for someone to communicate through this medium was significantly limited to a relatively privileged few. Information was seen as a commodity with inherent value and many identities from publishers to journalists were created as by-products of the industry. The Internet has forced us to rethink our assumptions about information and all of the identities associated with the information industry. Wikipedia has transformed encyclopedias from being static physical books of information to a digitized, dynamic and continually evolving repository of information. Youtube has transformed the way video can be distributed. And, as in the case I outlined previously, created a platform where the value of information is based on its utility and relevance to the person(s) consuming it. The open source software concept has transformed the production of software. In an open source project there is not a parent company organizing and

planning out a well-conceived notion of a software application. Instead, you see a self-organized group rallying around a specific problem they want to solve. You do not have to be an employee of a company to contribute to the software product; you simply have to be someone with time, talent, and a computer. The Internet is providing us with a front row seat to the process of social construction and in many cases, as in Wikipedia, it leaves a “paper” trail, meaning you can see each previous iteration of an article. So, not only is social construction taking place but we have trace evidence on a scale never before seen.

The possibilities are endless. In my dissertation project I document how I used what I learned from the Internet, the field of social construction and complexity theory to evolve an evaluation project with a community in Boise Idaho. The project is outlined in detail in the next section which provides a case study of my project.

## **Section 3 – Case Study**

### **Chapter 9 - Context Setting**

It is challenging to summarize in writing, which is rather linear, a process that was non-linear. The case study that follows did not occur as a result of how the previous two sections shaped my thinking. Rather, the case study emerged as my thinking changed, both by what I was learning from the Internet and social construction and by what I was learning from my interactions with the evaluation participants. I wanted the project to be a collaborative process with the community being studied, and I knew we didn't have a budget. I didn't have a set methodology in mind prior to the evaluation. I was searching for ideas as the evaluation was moving forward, led by the feedback from the participants.

I was not totally naive to evaluation. My graduate studies were in Psychology and I had been working in Child Welfare for over a decade. I had experience participating in both small and large evaluations. However, I was always struck at how the evaluations produced very little actual change. When you talk to an evaluator they will often tell you amazing stories about what they learned. When you talk to those being evaluated you will often hear stories about how they felt misunderstood or misrepresented. To overcome this challenge I wanted to ensure that the participants were included in the analysis and sense making aspects of the inquiry. This was where I started the project.

This case study does not represent facts that should be accepted and spread universally. Rather, this case study is intended to add to the growing body of literature on how to conduct participatory social construction inquiry. While the inquiry is being framed as “evaluation” it was clear we were aiming for something different and approaching evaluation from a different paradigm. The interest was not in how effective the collaboration was in providing services to

youth but rather how the group (service providers and the youth they serve) develops shared understanding and knowledge. The overarching question was how does a collaborative group learn and take action together? The inquiry is focusing both on the immediate needs of the community while simultaneously exploring a new paradigm, namely social construction. In the book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn talks of a paradigm testing as a different activity than a research worker participating in “normal science” (Kuhn, 1962).

“Instead he is like the chess player who, with a problem stated and the board physically or mentally before him, tries out various alternative moves in the search for a solution.

These trial attempts, whether by the chess player or by the scientist, are trials only of themselves, not of the rules of the game. They are possible only so long as the paradigm itself is taken for granted. Therefore, paradigm-testing occurs only after persistent failure to solve a noteworthy puzzle has give rise to crisis” (Kuhn, 1962, pp. 144-145)

The social construction paradigm often challenges taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (Burr, 2003). From that line of thought, it would seem that every social construction inquiry would include some type of paradigm-testing. This case study can be read from the perspective of community members interested in the findings or as other inquiry practitioners interested in the process.

## Chapter 10 – Introduction to the Case Study

The Idaho Resource Opportunities Communities Knowledge (IROCK) collaboration engaged in a self-evaluation project using narrative and sense making methodologies within a social construction orientation. The IROCK collaboration is a coalition of thirty-plus Treasure Valley public, private, and non-profit organizations serving Young Adults ages 14-25 that are experiencing or likely to experience barriers to their transition into adulthood. The mission of the IROCK collaboration is to “*prepare and support young people on their journey to independence*”.

The IROCK collaboration wanted to gain deeper insights into how they, and the community they serve, generate knowledge and use that learning to take informed action. The inquiry had two central focuses. Generating a shared understanding of the issues facing youth transitioning into adulthood was one focus of this inquiry. The other central focus was to develop a methodology of self-evaluation that the collaborative partners could sustain into the future. Many evaluation efforts seek to measure the effectiveness of services, while this is an enticing proposition, it can prove to be difficult in social services because effectiveness may have different meanings to different stakeholders. As stated in the book *Empowerment Evaluation*, “The assessment of a program’s value and worth is not the end point of the evaluation – as it often is in traditional evaluation – but part of an ongoing process of program improvement” (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996). In traditional evaluation, there are clear and separate roles for the evaluator(s) and those evaluated. The intent of this project was to distribute the workload of the evaluation across those being evaluated. In turn, the evaluated are also the evaluators. My role moved from being evaluator to a facilitator of the evaluation process for this group.

There were two issues that guided the creation of the initial inquiry questions. First, the needs of the community partners were central to the development of the project. After several meetings with key stakeholders from the community partners we drafted a set of questions to guide the inquiry process.

- What are the challenges former foster youth face when transitioning into adulthood in this community?
- How well, or not, are the collaborative partners working together to provide a spectrum of services to this population of young adults?
- What are the differences and similarities in the ways young adults and service providers see the issues facing this community?

Second, developing a sustainable low/no-cost methodology of self-evaluation was explored in this project. I developed a set of questions in partnership with the stakeholders to guide this aspect of the inquiry.

- Can the self-organization principles in open source and crowd-sourcing projects be applied to evaluation?
- What types of evaluation activities place those being evaluated front and center in both analysis and sense making (the social construction of knowledge)?
- How can a group learn together and store that knowledge to build upon it in future inquiry projects?
- What will help the group move from learning to taking informed action?

The first set of inquiry questions was generated through conversation with the collaborative group. The second set of questions was developed primarily by my interest in meeting their need to have a self-evaluation process they could sustain when my participation ended.

## Chapter 11 - Early Adaptations – The Shift to Stories

Eager to apply the lessons I was learning from the Internet my first idea was to develop a social network website for the group. At the time ning.com was offering the ability to create a free social networking site. The sites were supported by advertisements placed on the side of each webpage. The sites were fairly comprehensive and had a robust discussion board feature. The thought was to create the infrastructure for the group to talk about various issues in a discussion board format. In this way the conversations would be stored and used as data.

This idea failed quickly. Some users did sign on and actively participate but there were several people that were not comfortable with the technology or they had difficulty accessing the site for various reasons (mostly due to constraints on Internet usage by various employers). The site was not generating the amount of information needed to adequately answer the research questions. In retrospect, I can see that this early stumbling block arose because I took a largely technical approach to the inquiry rather than incorporating the key principles outlined in the previous sections. In the earlier chapters on the Internet, I state several times that my interest is more in the way groups form and get work done rather than the technology supporting that work. Despite my own best efforts I was lured by the technology aspects and lost sight of the organizing principles. In particular, the bar for participation was set too high and narrow. Participation needs to be easy. The social networking site was relatively easy for the young adults to use but the service providers found the technological hurdle too high to overcome. I approached the group with the information, or literally the lack thereof, and asked them for alternative ideas.

I met with a core set of the collaborative partners to discuss other options. The idea of some type of survey emerged but was quickly dismissed as “more of the same” type of previous evaluation efforts. One of the members suggested interviews as a means of data collection.



Several members agreed that interviews would likely uncover more information than a survey. I had been recently reading about using stories as data and was intrigued by the idea. I told the group about some of the concepts I was learning about in a book entitled “Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization” (Kurtz C. , Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization, 2009). In the book Kurtz provides numerous ideas on how to conduct a story project from start to finish. Kurtz has recently been calling her work Participatory Narrative Inquiry (Kurtz C. , Participatory Narrative Inquiry, 2011). It is important to note that her use of the term “story project” is quite different than many of the story projects one would find doing a Google search for the term. The term story is not to denote a well constructed and well performed story. As stated earlier, story in this context denotes the lived raw experience of an individual. The group liked the idea and we moved forward with a plan to develop a project outline with a focus on stories. We would continue to use the ning website, but more as a hub for information and a communication tool rather than for data collection.

The next chapter discusses the case study methodology which is a synthesis of the principles gleaned from the Internet, social construction theory, and the Cynefin Framework from Kurtz and Snowden (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). The methodology that emerged was unique to the context of this evaluation but it is closely aligned with Kurtz work which she calls Participatory Narrative Inquiry (Kurtz C. , Participatory Narrative Inquiry, 2011).

## Chapter 12 – Participatory Narrative Inquiry Approach – Methodology

The intent of this project was to help the IROCK collaboration in Idaho explore how they learn together, build shared understanding, and take action on what they learn. The participants in this project included both service providers and the young adults they serve. Approval regarding the project scope, direction, and structure were made by the IROCK steering committee. It is important to note that all steering committee members are service providers, although one service provider was a former foster youth in the community. The intent was to include some young adults on the steering committee however this was not possible due to schedules and timing.

The primary data for the inquiry were collected in the form of anecdotes (short stories) in response to story eliciting questions and in the form of questions to learn more about the stories people told. A total of 65 stories were collected from 14 service providers and 12 young adult clients during four separate sessions. The project culminated in a day long sense making session with 8 service providers and 8 young adult participants (1 of the service providers and 2 of the young adults in the sense making session did not submit stories during the data collection period – this was intentional to add more points of view to the project).

The project resulted in a final report which has been slightly reformatted and makes up the majority of this case study section. The overall project consisted of the following milestones (the items in this list are explained in more detail throughout the rest of this section):

- **Project proposal and approval by the IROCK steering committee:** After some early experimentation the group agreed to take a narrative approach to the inquiry project.

- **Steering committee collaboration on core inquiry questions:** I facilitated a meeting with the steering committee via video conference to construct a set of story “eliciting questions that would be asked of a group of service providers (see appendix D) and a group of young adults (see appendix E). In addition to the story eliciting questions the group also developed a set of questions that participants would answer about the story they told (see appendix F). Finally, a participant profile was developed to gather some basic demographic information about each participant (see appendix B and C).
- **Anecdote Circles:** Four separate anecdote circles (story collection) sessions with the service providers and young adults were facilitated by me via video conference (I am based in Seattle and the group is in Boise Idaho).
- **Story Teller Profile:** Each participant in the anecdote circles completed a Story Teller Profile (see appendix B and C).
- **Questions about the Stories:** Participants that told stories during the anecdote circles completed a Questions about the Stories form (see appendix F). This form allowed for users to provide further context to the story they told.
- **Transcriptions of stories:** All stories shared during the anecdote circle sessions were transcribed.
- **Catalysis Report:** I compiled the stories, the questions about the stories, and the story teller profiles into a Catalysis report (see chapter 13).
- **Sense Making Session:** A sense making session was held in May 2010 which included both service providers and young adults. The intent of the session was to engage

stakeholders to dig deeper into their stories to extract themes, patterns, and other relevant items from which to base future action.

- **Summary Report:** I wrote a summary report which provided a detail summary of the entire project including findings and recommendations for next steps.

The methodology used for this project is made up of a combination of various narrative inquiry techniques. The methodology was developed from a social construction orientation to inquiry and incorporated a multi-ontology framework. The Participatory Narrative Inquiry methodology was largely influenced by the work of Cynthia Kurtz and Dave Snowden as discussed in Chapter 11. Dave Snowden is the Founder and Chief Scientific Officer of Cognitive Edge (Cognitive Edge, 2007). Snowden and Kurtz worked together at IBM where they both contributed to the development of the Cynefin Framework and series of methods to utilize narrative data combined with semi-structured questions about the narrative data (Snowden D. , 2010). The inquiry developed by Snowden and Kurtz shares some similarities with Grounded Theory. The basic premise of Grounded Theory is that the theory emerges from the data as opposed to starting with a hypothesis or preconceived notion (Glaser & Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory; Strategies for Qualitative Research, 1967). Anyone with a cursory understanding of Grounded Theory knows there is a continued debate over what Grounded Theory really is and how it should be done. The split between Glaser and Strauss has resulted in variants of Grounded Theory that range in orientation from positivist to constructivist (Hallberg, 2006). Glaser cautions against the use of the term Constructivist Grounded Theory because it places a preconceived orientation on the data (Glaser, 2002). I want to make a clear distinction that this project should not be considered a Grounded Theory project. There are some similarities indeed, specifically in relation to diving into the data and letting the theory emerge.

While Grounded Theory encourages emergent patterns it still relies quite heavily on a “researcher” as a critical component to coding and categorizing. This project placed the process of coding and categorizing into the hands of the group being evaluated. This places them at the center of the sense-making process of their data.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

There were three primary sources of data used in this project (Story Teller Profile, Anecdotes/Stories, and Questions about the Stories). The data were collected during four separate anecdote circles between December 2009 and February 2010. In addition the Catalysis Report (see chapter 13) served as a summary of patterns in the metadata that was used in the sense making process (see chapter 14). Each participant was provided with an Informed Consent Form which can be found in Appendix A.

### **Story Teller Profile**

Each participant in the anecdote circles completed a Story Teller Profile. The Story Teller Profile provided basic information about each story teller and can be found in Appendix B and Appendix C. The group of story tellers consisted of both Service Providers and Young Adults. The Service Provider participants were self-selected members of the IROCK Collaboration. The Young Adults were referred by various partners of the collaboration. The Story Teller Profile information was coded so it could be linked to a person’s stories and their Question about the Stories forms. The information collected on these forms are discussed in detail in chapter 13.

### **Anecdotes Circles**

The story collection method was a group interview process called Anecdote Circles (Callahan, Schenk, & Rixon, 2008). The sessions were recorded with the participants’

knowledge and later transcribed. A total of 14 Service Providers and 12 Young Adults participated in four separate Anecdote Circle sessions. The Service Providers and Young Adults attended separate sessions. The two groups were separated intentionally for the Anecdote Circles because it was thought the young adults may be influenced in what they say by the presence of social workers and vice versa. The Anecdote Circles began with a set of story-eliciting questions which can be found in Appendix D and Appendix E. The story-eliciting questions were developed by the IROCK steering committee members. The questions were tested with a small number of young adults and refined based on their feedback. During the Anecdote Circles only one question was asked at a time and participants could choose to tell a story in response or not. The group decided when they were ready to move on to the next question. In addition to story-eliciting questions, participants were given time at the end of the Anecdote Circle sessions for open sharing of stories. The basic protocol was as follows:

- Introductions
- Explain and hand out Informed Consent forms
- Obtain verbal agreement from all participants for recording the session
- Provide participants with a brief overview of the process
  - There are five story eliciting questions
  - A question will be read aloud to the group
  - Anyone in the group can respond with a story
  - After telling a story the story teller will complete a Questions about the Story form (see appendix F)
  - Time will be allotted to allow all participants to tell at least one story per question (however, participants are not required to tell a story in response to each question)

- When the group is comfortable to move on, the next question will be read
- Time will be allotted at the end of the session for open story telling. This is an opportunity for participants to tell stories that are important to the inquiry but not represented in the story eliciting questions.
- After 90-120 minutes the session will conclude
- Provide participants with blank Questions about the Story forms
- Begin the story eliciting process and begin recording

There were several practical and strategic reasons for using anecdote circles. From a practical perspective, conducting anecdote circles maximized the usage of time by having multiple participants in the interview process. This enabled us to gather over sixty stories from twenty-six participants in just four sessions. The other major practical hurdle was geographic space. The participants were all in Boise Idaho and I was located in Seattle Washington. Our organization had existing high quality video conferencing infrastructure in place and I was able to conduct the anecdote circles via video conference. Ideally, I would have preferred to be present in the same room with the participants but our lack of a budget did not allow for this type of interaction. On a side note, I was allowed to travel to Boise for one trip and I wanted to save that trip for the sense making session.

Anecdotes are generally short biographical stories of a real incident (Merriam-Webster, 2011). This type of narrative data would be ideal in the sense that it would capture the lived raw experience of an individual. The anecdotes, or stories, are told in response to story-eliciting questions. This is also helpful because the participants would not have the opportunity to rehearse or perform stories. The stories emerge more naturally as they would in a conversation. Anecdote circles emphasize a space to explore stories without judgment or response to the story

told. The goal is to get diverse perspectives from many participants (Callahan, Schenk, & Rixon, 2008). This idea fits well with the basic tenants of Participatory Narrative Inquiry and social construction notions (Kurtz C. , Participatory Narrative Inquiry, 2011). Sometimes social service evaluations are conducted as a means to determine if a project or program continues to receive funding. This places a value on the output of the evaluation, especially for those who would be impacted either positively or negatively from the output of the evaluation. This feature can influence how participants answer questions. Anecdote circles on the other hand, create an environment of openness and learning. There are no “right” or “wrong” stories; there are simply the experiences of the participants. Conducting anecdote circles allowed for a good mix of practical and strategic benefits and the methodology was a good match for the philosophical values of the project.

Finally, Anecdote circles also fit nicely with the principles I learned from my exploration of the Internet. Anecdote circles make an easy entry point to participation. Conducting the session via video conferences helped to keep the costs down. Even though we used story-eliciting questions, each question was worded in a way to elicit a story that was viewed as positive, negative, or value neutral. We also included time where participants could tell any anecdotes outside of the prepared questions. This allowed for participants to engage in the process of setting the parameters around value and relevance.

### **Questions about Stories**

For every story told each story-teller filled out a Questions about the Story form which can be found in Appendix F. The Questions about the Story form is an integral part of allowing participants to further signify their stories. The stories they tell are not meant to be well thought out fully constructed stories, rather the intent is to capture their raw lived experience around



various issues. By asking additional structured questions about the story, participants can provide further context and signification to their story. The metadata can then be used for aggregation and pattern detection. There are many different types of questions that can be asked after someone has told a story. We wanted to keep the questions to a minimum of five to seven questions in an effort to hold true to the principle of keeping participation easy. The questions allowed participants to identify their emotional tone associated with the story as well as other important aspects of context such as frequency of the circumstances, predictability of the circumstances, the purpose of the story, and an approximation of when the story took place. The practice of developing metadata questions was new to the IROCK participants so they asked if I would draft a set of questions they could review and edit. I drafted the initial set of metadata questions and we changed them based on the IROCK steering committee feedback.

I believe this aspect of the project is one of the most powerful components. By asking a common set of structured questions for each story one can easily aggregate this metadata to examine patterns. It also reinforces the principle of placing the determination of value and relevance in the hands of the story tellers by providing them the opportunity to place context around their story. The lesson from the Internet this most resembles is the notion of tagging. Tagging is used on the internet as a means of providing user-generated organization to content. In a very similar way, asking questions about stories does the same thing. As mentioned earlier, in a grounded theory project the narrative data is coded and organized. Asking questions about a story is a way to allow users the first effort at coding and signifying their story.

## Chapter 13 - Catalyst and Analysis = Catalysis

Catalysis is a term from chemistry that describes the change in rate of a chemical reaction, typically an increase, due to the introduction of a catalyst. It is used here as a metaphor to describe the first phase of sense making. Analysis is typically the process of analyzing data. However, analysis is often carried out by a “researcher” or “professional” of some sort. Catalysis on the hand, aims to provide participants an initial glimpse at emerging patterns in the data and to serve as a catalyst for further sense making hence the name catalysis. The information for catalysis is generated by aggregating the data collected from the Questions about the Story forms, the Story Teller Profile forms, and excerpts from the stories told. Catalysis is a fitting metaphor because it initiates the sense making process and provides participants many different entry points into examining the data. During the project I produced a separate report entitled Catalysis and provided it to the steering committee and presented it to the service providers and young adults at the beginning of the sense making session. For this dissertation that report has been slightly reformatted and makes up the majority of this chapter.

There are a myriad of patterns that can emerge by combining the various data collected from the Story Teller Profile and Questions about the Story forms. For this project I combined and recombined the data several times and took the liberty, with full knowledge from the participants, to select the patterns that were clear and relevant to the group. This negotiation was the result of time and person-power constraints and was not the preferred method. The original proposal was to have a small group of participants work on the pattern development together, but schedules and timeframes eliminated that option. In addition to providing visual representations (through graphs and charts) of the patterns, I also provided some context for each pattern and in some areas provided a possible interpretation (and labeled it as such). Again, this practice was

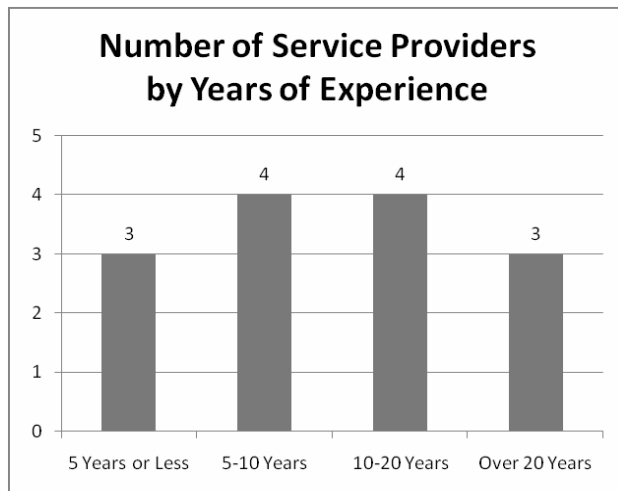
supported by the group and it was clear to the group that the interpretations were intended to entice (or catalyze) further conversation. The distinction is important because I did not want them to read the catalysis and simply accept the information as “expert” analysis, which would completely defeat the purpose. My interpretation would be based both on the patterns that were emerging and my knowledge of the stories told. I facilitated each Anecdote Circle and, primarily because we did not have a budget, I transcribed all of the recorded stories myself. My familiarity of the material was leveraged to provide the group an initial look at their data. In addition to the interpretation, there are sections where I included excerpts from the stories that served as the basis of my interpretation and labeled those sections as “In Their Own Words.”

## **Patterns by Participant**

During the data collection phase I conducted four Anecdote Circles, two for Service Providers and two for Young Adults. The information gathered from the Story Teller Profile forms are summarized below for each group.

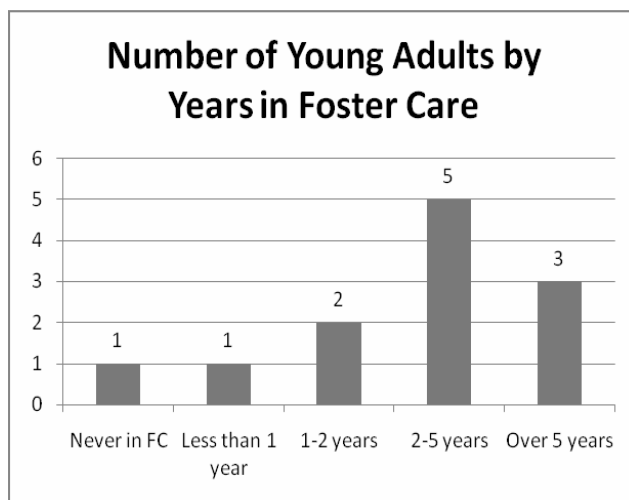
### **Service Providers**

A total of fourteen Service Providers participated in two different anecdote circles. All of them identified that they had direct service experience. Six of the fourteen said they had supervisory experience and two of them had experience as a director. Services Providers were asked to provide their years of experience in child welfare. The fourteen Service Providers had a total of 201 years of experience between them. This chart shows the number of Service Providers by Years of Experience.



## Young Adults

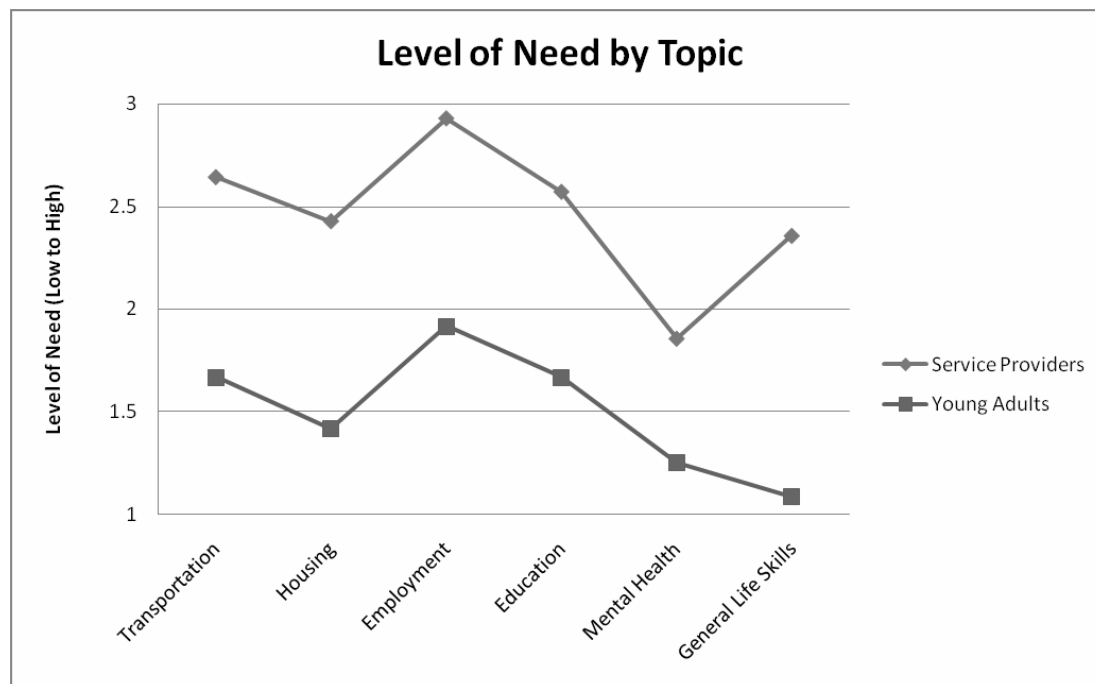
There were twelve Young Adult participants in two different anecdote circles. The Young Adults ranged in age from 18-25. Only one Young Adult had no experience in the Foster Care system. While many of the Young Adults served by the IROCK collaboration have been in foster care they also serve youth who have not been in foster care but are seen as “at-risk.”



## Assessment of Need in the Community

The IROCK collaboration focuses on six key areas (Transportation, Housing, Employment, Education, Mental Health, and General Life Skills). Service Providers were asked to rate the

level of need in each category by specifying if it applies to Almost All, About Half, or Only a Few of the Young Adults they serve. Young Adults were asked to rate the level of assistance they need in each category by specifying if they needed, A Lot of Help, A Little Help, Or No Help. Their ratings were converted into an average score (1 representing the lowest level of need and 3 representing the highest level of need). The graph below shows the results.



## Interpretation

The most striking pattern is the gap between the two groups, however, it would be inappropriate to compare the level of need between the two groups because the questions were worded differently and that may explain the gap between them. It is interesting to note that the lines trend together. There appears to be agreement in terms of the overall trend across all domains with the exception of General Life Skills. From this graph Employment is the domain with the highest level of need followed by Education, Transportation and Housing. The narratives told by both groups supported these trends. Many stories included themes of difficulty of finding work, maintaining stable housing, and lack of public transportation in the community.

Mental Health received a relatively low rating from both groups however many of the stories told included mental health issues. One possible explanation for this contradiction could be that the question refers to the level of need for Young Adults. While a few of the stories included themes of mental health for Young Adults, the majority of the mental health references in the stories were about birth family members. In several stories mental health issues of birth family members played a significant role in the Young Adults placement and/or housing situation. Another explanation could simply revolve around the stigma associated with mental health. People may interpret mental health to mean something diagnosable versus emotional well-being.

General Life Skills was the one exception where the Service Providers and Young Adults diverged significantly in their assessment of the level of need. Service Providers see a fairly high level of need and Young Adults claim they need very little help in this area. The Young Adults stories contradicted their rating. Many of their stories expressed a need for preparation for adulthood, relationship skills, navigation of public systems, etc. One explanation could be that Service Providers have a “taken-for-granted” meaning of the term General Life Skills whereas Young Adults may not be sure what that term means.

## **Patterns in the Questions about the Story data (see appendix F)**

There were a total of 65 stories collected. Service Providers told 33 stories and Young Adults told 32. The story-eliciting questions were similar for both groups and the questions about the stories were identical.

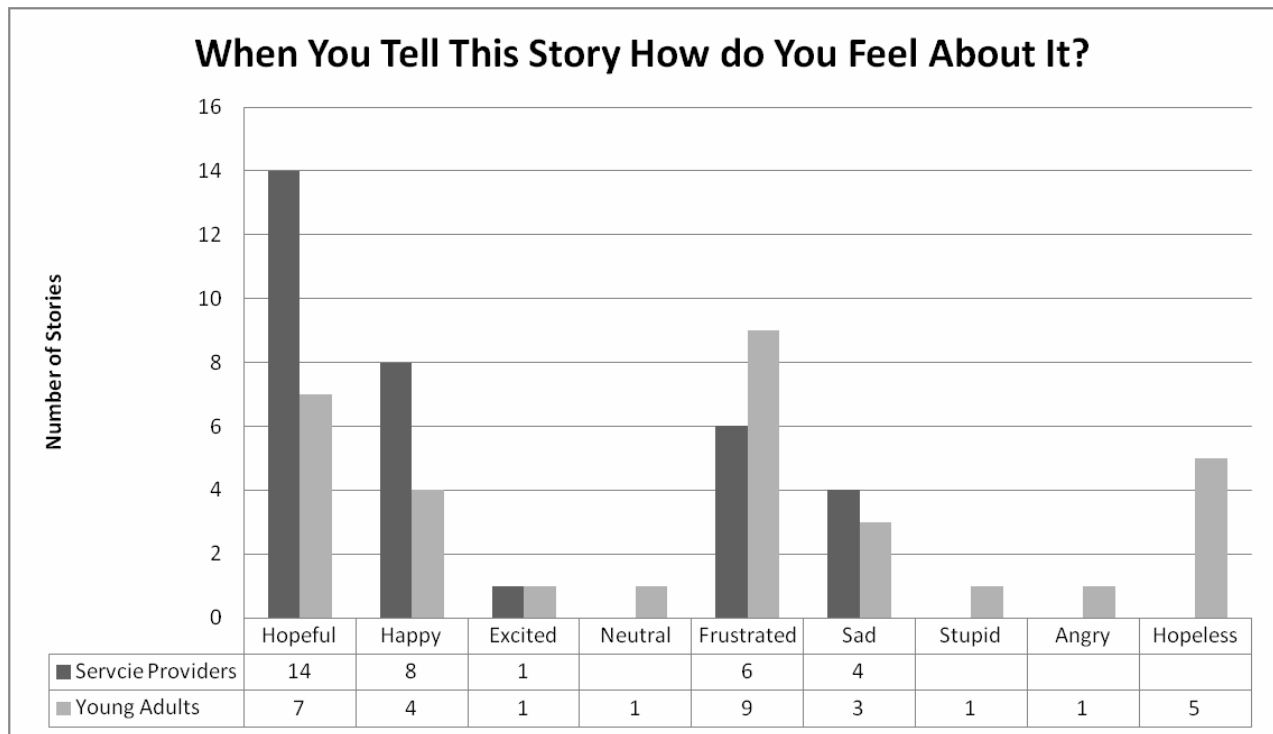
## Stories by Story Eliciting Question

There were 5 story eliciting questions for each group. The questions were similar but worded differently to make them relevant to each group. In addition there was time allotted for “open story telling” where participants could tell any story they felt was relevant to the process. Some of these stories were categorized by the group and those that didn’t fit any category remained labeled as “Open Stories.” Below is a table showing the breakdown of stories by question (an N/A means that topic was Not Asked of that group).

| <b>Story Eliciting Question</b>                 | <b>Service Providers</b> | <b>Young Adults</b> |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Working with Multiple Agencies at the same time | 12                       | 5                   |
| Turning Point/Stories I won’t forget            | 7                        | 10                  |
| Behavior to be Modeled or Avoided               | 3                        | 7                   |
| Open Stories                                    | 3                        | 2                   |
| Small Gesture                                   | 4                        | N/A                 |
| What is the biggest gap in services             | N/A                      | 4                   |
| Breaking Through Barriers                       | 4                        | N/A                 |
| Recommendations for a friend                    | N/A                      | 2                   |
| Things No One Is Talking About                  | N/A                      | 2                   |
| <b>Total</b>                                    | <b>33</b>                | <b>32</b>           |

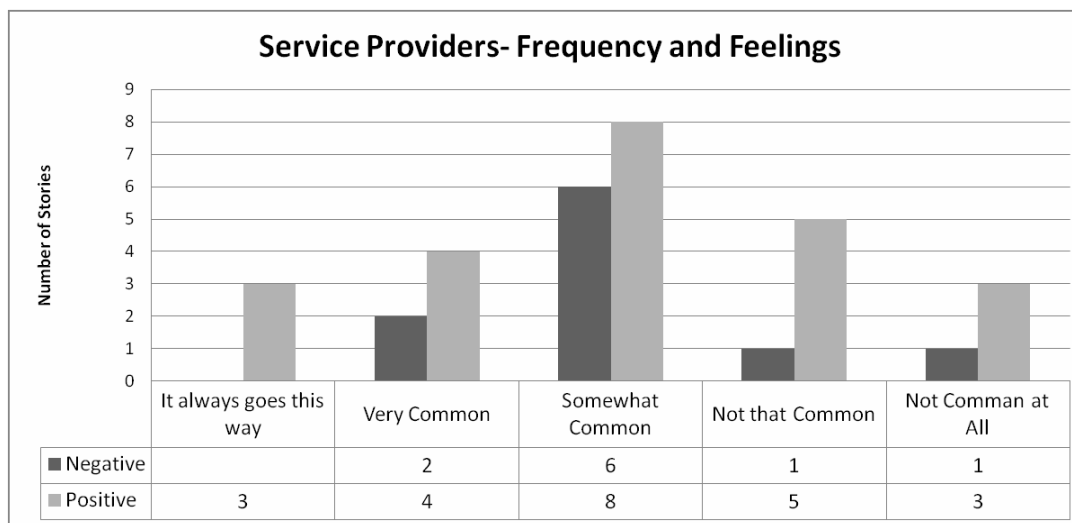
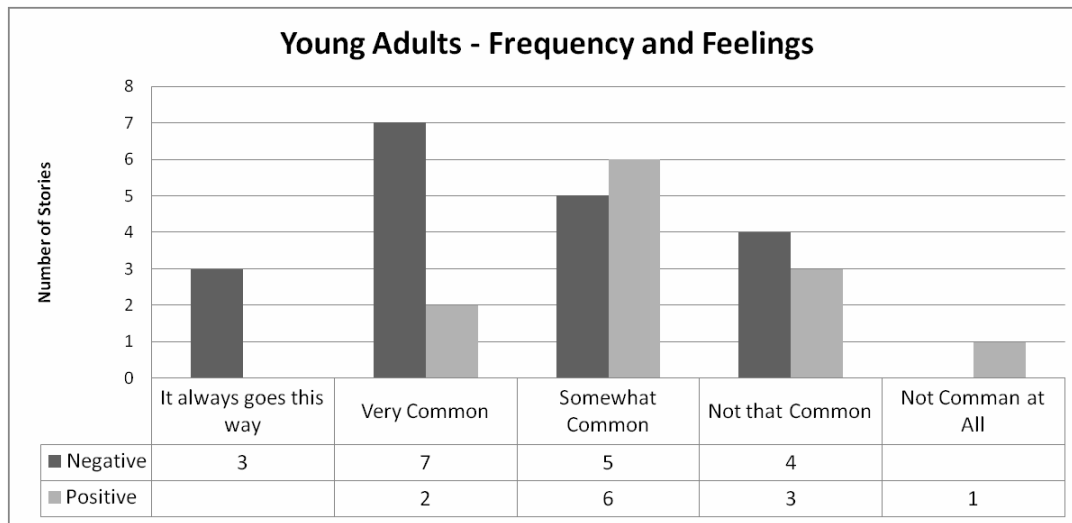
## Feelings and Frequency within the Stories

During the Anecdote Circles participants were asked to answer a series of questions about the story they told to help signify what their story means to them. The Questions about the Story Form can be found in Appendix F. Participants were asked to rate how they felt when they told their story. This allows participants to self-signify their feelings associated with the story. This is helpful because feelings can be difficult to discern when reading just the text of a story. The graph below shows the distribution of feelings across the stories told by Service Providers and Young Adults.



The next two charts combine the feeling data with the frequency question. For the following charts the feeling data were combined into generally positive (hopeful, happy, and excited) and generally negative (frustrated, sad, stupid, angry, and hopeless). Participants were asked to rate how frequently they find themselves in situations like the story they told. The frequency question helps to identify patterns that are happening regularly as opposed to issues that may have been anomalous. While all experiences are important, it is helpful to know what circumstances people are experiencing on a regular basis. When examining changes to service provision you want to make sure you are making changes to regularly occurring patterns as opposed to developing a short term strategy to deal with a one-off or unique situation. The first chart shows the pattern for Young Adults and the second chart shows the pattern for the Service Providers.





## Interpretation

In general Service Providers told more positive stories than the Young Adults. Service Providers described most of their circumstances as “Somewhat Common” and their emotional tone was fairly evenly distributed across the frequency spectrum. Young Adults also described most of their circumstances as “Somewhat Common.” However, their negative stories tended to occur more frequently than their positive stories. When you combine the “It Always Goes this Way” and “Very Common” categories the Service Providers and Young Adults have very different patterns. When Young Adults told stories that involved very regularly occurring

circumstances 83% of them were negative. When Service Providers told stories that involved very regularly occurring circumstances 77% of them were positive. To examine these patterns more closely we can look at some extracts of the stories below.

### **In Their Own Words - Looking Deeper into Story Themes**

There were a total of 21 stories labeled as “It Always Goes This Way” or “Very Common.” The Young Adults told 12 of these stories, 10 negative and 2 positive. Service Providers told 9 of these stories, 7 positive stories and 2 negative. Three major themes emerged for the Young Adults: Preparation for Adulthood, Community Support for Young Adults Leaving Care, and Family. For Service Providers two primary themes emerged: Collaboration/Working Together and Youth Participation. Below are selected quotes from each group organized by theme.

#### **Young Adult Themes**

- Preparation For Adulthood – Selected Quotes
  - *“I think I didn’t really grow up and mature until about 6 months ago. I moved to a different State and learned how to take care of myself and I didn’t have any help from anyone. I learned that I am the only one I can truly depend on.”*
  - *“When I turned 18 I moved in with some friends thinking I can do whatever I want. However, I didn’t realize what I was getting myself into...I think it would be helpful to have a better understanding of what is needed when we leave foster care and turn 18.”*

- *“I wish someone would have taught me how to act appropriately, like what’s decent and what’s indecent...I just think it would be good if they provided you with some training on how to interact.”*
- Community Supports for Young Adults Leaving Foster Care – Selected Quotes
  - *“I feel like there aren’t a lot of programs and support for youth aging out of care...Unless you are connected with your birth family, but most of the time that’s pretty dysfunctional.”*
  - *“I think there are a lot of programs in Boise set up to help people...It’s just a matter of people don’t know about them.”*
  - *“There is always assistance out there it’s just a matter of knowing how to work the system and finding the programs.”*
  - *“Transportation is lousy here...The bus system only runs until 6pm.”*
  - *“I think unemployment is a big deal in Boise.”*
  - *“I turned in several applications to places and I followed up with them but I haven’t heard anything back from anyone.”*
- Family – Selected Quotes
  - *“I am in the middle of a turning point right now and I don’t know how things are going to work out. Mostly it’s my relationship with my current foster family and figuring out how this relationship will work after graduating.”*
  - *“When I was put in foster care they didn’t teach me about relationships and interacting with people your own age.”*

- *“One thing in particular caught up with me and I didn’t even think about it or know it was wrong. My family and I were doing a lot of drugs. So, a lot of bad things were happening around me and I didn’t know it was bad because everyone was doing it.”*

## **Service Provider Themes**

- Collaboration/Working Together – Selected Quotes
  - *“Collaborating has helped us gain awareness of all the work that is going on in the community...We found that the Department of Labor has a lot of history and experience in the area of employment. So we can leverage what they bring to the table with what we bring to the table to serve young adults in the best possible way.”*
  - *“When I think about how all of us work together (in the IROCK collaboration) what I have noticed is how well we can get young people connected to services that they are eligible for based on the relationships we have built in this collaboration...I just think the relationships we have built with each other really make a difference.”*
  - *This story is not going so well...Part of the problem we are having is that all of the agencies involved are working well together but his Medicaid has been discontinued...because we can’t get the resources and support he is deserving of we are starting at square one...The hurdle is bureaucracy.”*
  - *“I was thinking about one young person on my caseload. He transitioned out of foster care and we provided some services for him but he fell through the cracks. We were trying to get him on SSI and for that is a daunting process. So, having a*

*contact person there who knew me was great. I didn't have to make phone calls to people I didn't know. We were able to get services for him. I couldn't have done it without that contact person at social security and the help of other agencies working together to get him help."*

- Youth Participation – Selected Quotes

- *"I have run into this situation a couple of times when we have lots of services and collaboration around a young adult, however, the young adult gets to a point when they have some light at the end of the tunnel and it scares them. So they think, 'let's commit another crime so I can be detained longer and avoid stepping through a door I am not familiar with.' Even if that door is a better place it's not a door they know."*
- *"There is a young man that I really like. I love this kid but he won't let us help him. Every time we try to turn the discussion to getting a job or something like that he changes the conversation to 'How are the Cavaliers?' It's frustrating because you have this relationship with this young adult but all that help and direction you want to give him he simply will not accept."*

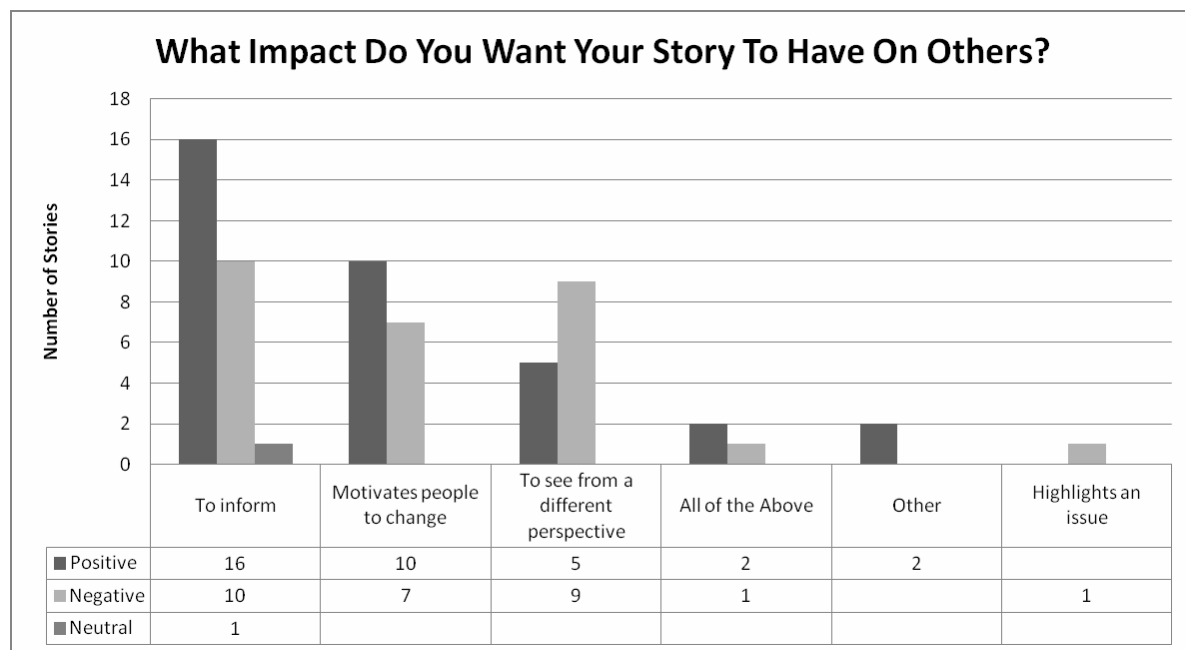
## Feelings and the Impact of the Stories on Others

Participants were asked to label what impact they hope their story will have on others.

They could choose from the following items:

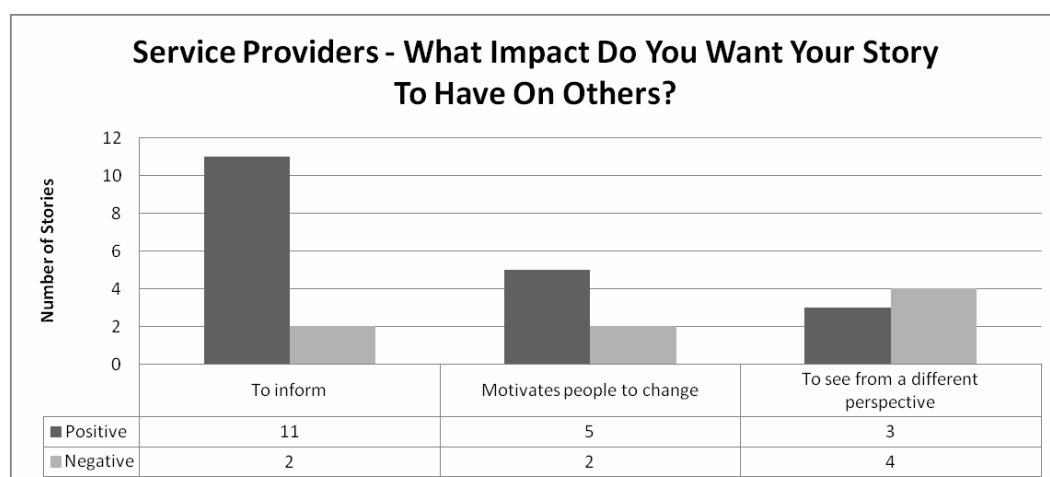
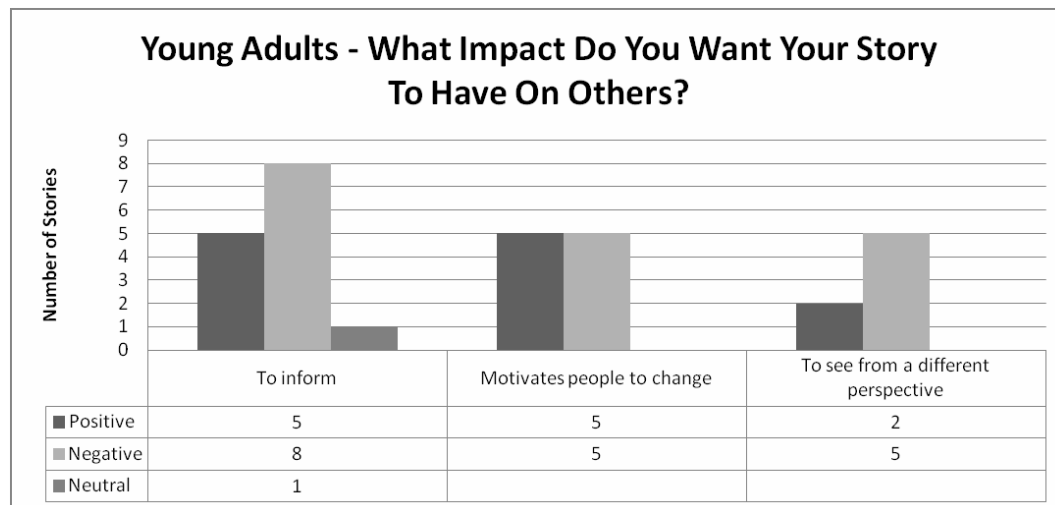
- ☐ I hope this story informs people.
- ☐ I hope this story motivates people to change.
- ☐ I hope this story will help people see things from a different perspective
- ☐ I hope this story highlights an issue that nobody seems to be talking about.
- ☐ I hope this story (please fill in) \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this question was to provide the story teller the opportunity to signify what type of impact they would like their story to have on others. The chart below summarizes the data for both groups. The stories are grouped by their emotional tone (Positive, Negative, and Neutral).



This chart shows the majority of the stories being told in three of the seven categories. About 41% of the stories told were told for the intent “To Inform” others. Within this category, 16 stories had positive feelings associated with them, 10 had negative feelings associated with them,

and 1 was considered neutral. The category “Motivates People to Change” made up about 26% of the stories. In that category there were 10 positive stories and 7 negative stories. And finally, the category “To Help People See Things from a Different Perspective” was made up of about 22% of the stories. In that category there were 5 positive stories and 9 negative stories. It is interesting to note this was the only category where more negative stories were told than positive stories. The next two charts show the details for these top three categories broken out by Young Adults and Service Providers.



## Interpretation

The most common category was “To inform” which also seemed to be the “safest” category, a kind of catch-all for both groups. This category included many more negative stories for Young Adults than for Service Providers. When Service Providers are telling stories “to inform” they are overwhelmingly positive. This pattern is different for Young Adults. When they are telling stories “to inform” they told more negative stories than positive stories.

However, when Young Adults and Service Providers are talking about helping others to see things from a different perspective they both primarily had a negative feeling associated with those stories.

### **In Their Own Words - Looking Deeper into Story Themes**

As mentioned earlier the “To Inform” category seemed to be a catch all category for both groups. The themes within the stories in this category were very divergent. For the other two categories (Motivates People to Change, and See Things from a Different Perspective) the patterns were more pointed and detectable. Below are some themes that emerged for Young Adults and Service Providers across those two categories.

#### **Young Adult Themes**

- Motivates People to Change – Selected Quotes
  - *“Last year was probably the craziest year of my life. I had done some hard core drugs, pretty much been wherever I wanted to be, doing whatever I wanted to do. And this year I got busted for committing some crimes that I thought wouldn’t catch up with me...If you get a felony people don’t look at you the same. Luckily, I got two misdemeanors and that was a turning point in my life. I am not making the same mistakes and stupid decisions that I made in the past.”*



- *“One day, about a week after my birthday a police officer came to my school and I thought he was going to arrest somebody because a lot of people were doing drugs. But, he came up to me and told me to go into his car...Two days later I was being charged with 12 felonies...I ended up not listening to my therapist, not following through with probation, and I spent a couple of days in jail...I have been through a lot of hard stuff and my social worker was always there up to bat for me. I had a lot of help and eventually I started to listen to my counselor and following through with my probation and things started getting better.”*
- *“I’ve known my social worker since I was 16. She pushed me to leave a guy I was dating who is now dead because of drugs and alcohol. She pushed me to finish high school when I was two months pregnant. She can be aggressive but there is just something about her personality.”*
- **Help People See Things from a Different Perspective – Selected Quotes**
  - *“One of the things I really like about staff at Casey is they treat us with respect and we are part of the decision making process. What we think and want is valued in the way they talk to us and communicate with us, or me. I don’t want to speak for others.”*
  - *“I had a case worker just recently help me to see that this guy I was dating was a douche bag. Seriously, she did everything to show me...And, she even volunteered to get the case files from the court (since he was a sex predator) so I could actually hear what the victims had to say about him.”*

- *“My foster families never did teach me about other people. They simply laid down rules for me to follow. I never really learned how to interact with other people until I turned 18.”*
- *“Last month my rent was due. I get ETV’s from Health and Welfare and they pay my rent. There is a new property management company at my apartments. The new manager had my check on her desk but she didn’t know it was for me. So, I got a call saying my rent was 2 weeks past due. I wasn’t sure who to call or what to do so I called my case worker. She helped straighten it all out. So, little mistakes happen but it becomes a process because there are several people involved.”*
- *“I was prescribed medication for depression...When I talked with my social worker about taking the medication she said I didn’t need to be on that. It confused me and made me feel bad for taking the medication. I wish she would have just kept her opinion to herself. Things were working well for me.”*
- *“My turning point was exactly on my birthday. That was the day I went into foster care. It was just after my mother passed away...If I would have stayed with my mom I would have ended up like my brother who has been in jail for 9 years. It was bad at the beginning, obviously, because of depression, I just lost somebody I loved and I didn’t have a dad. I admired my mom. When I turned 16 I realized it was actually a good turning point in my life.”*
- *“Going into foster care wasn’t a bad experience; it actually freed me from my abusive step-dad. He was put in prison where he should be. After all that I thought life was going to get better. But recently my husband had an accident*

*and almost died...I thought why did God do this to me? Why does he take me from a hell of a childhood, takes me to a better life and then just takes my husband away? My prayers were answered when he (my husband) woke up and he is now almost 100%. ”*

## **Service Provider Themes**

- Motivates People to Change – Selected Quotes
  - *“I have a young adult that I just received from the Department. He just emancipated from foster care and he was adamant that he didn’t want to have any involvement with services. I kept attending his planning meetings...He turned 18 and was dropped off at a shelter. He finally called and wanted to put together a service plan...I think just continually being there to let them know that when they are ready we will be there.”*
  - *“One of the first people I met when I started working for this agency was a young man that just graduated. Right after high school we got him into Job Corps and he did really well...He began to suffer from mental health issues...He was homeless for nine months between the time he went to a shelter and we were able to get him on disability...During that time I would check on him two or three times per week. Through this experience I grew as much as probably he did just by seeing what he went through and walking in his world a little bit.”*
  - *“I had a youth that had come to me after dropping out of high school. At first he wanted to get his GED, but then he changed his mind and wanted to get back into an alternative high school...I went to his graduation and his mother came up to*

*me and said that he would have never graduated if it were not for this program. So, that was kind of a good warm fuzzy.”*

- *“We have a young man that came through foster care and aged out. This kid has some disabilities and we signed him up with voc rehab but that was about a 3-4 month waiting list. So we went to LDS employment services...He is thriving there and everyone loves him. It’s short term – 3-6 months. But, I think it will lead into some other stuff for him and he can at least add that to his experience.”*
- *“I am at a loss...What do we do for these kids to get them invested in their own future? When the motivation isn’t there it’s difficult...It’s heartbreaking.”*
- **Help People See Things from a Different Perspective – Selected Quotes**
  - *“We had a day treatment program. We also ran a parent support group. I had a parent who thanked us. They really felt validated. Even though we were part of the department they appreciated our work with them. That felt really good because as part of the department you were not always thought of very highly by parents, especially when doing child protection. So, that was a feel good moment.*
  - *“I had a student that was working through drug and alcohol issues and didn’t have health insurance...He went and got Medicare and unfortunately the treatment center wouldn’t take him because he was under 18 and his mother wouldn’t sign a consent form for him, she was an addict too. So, it’s good that he took it upon himself to make those changes, but bad because he didn’t get the treatment that he needed.”*
  - *“I am currently having a hard time connecting with a youth...We kept working with him and he kept saying he didn’t need us. ‘You haven’t done anything for me*

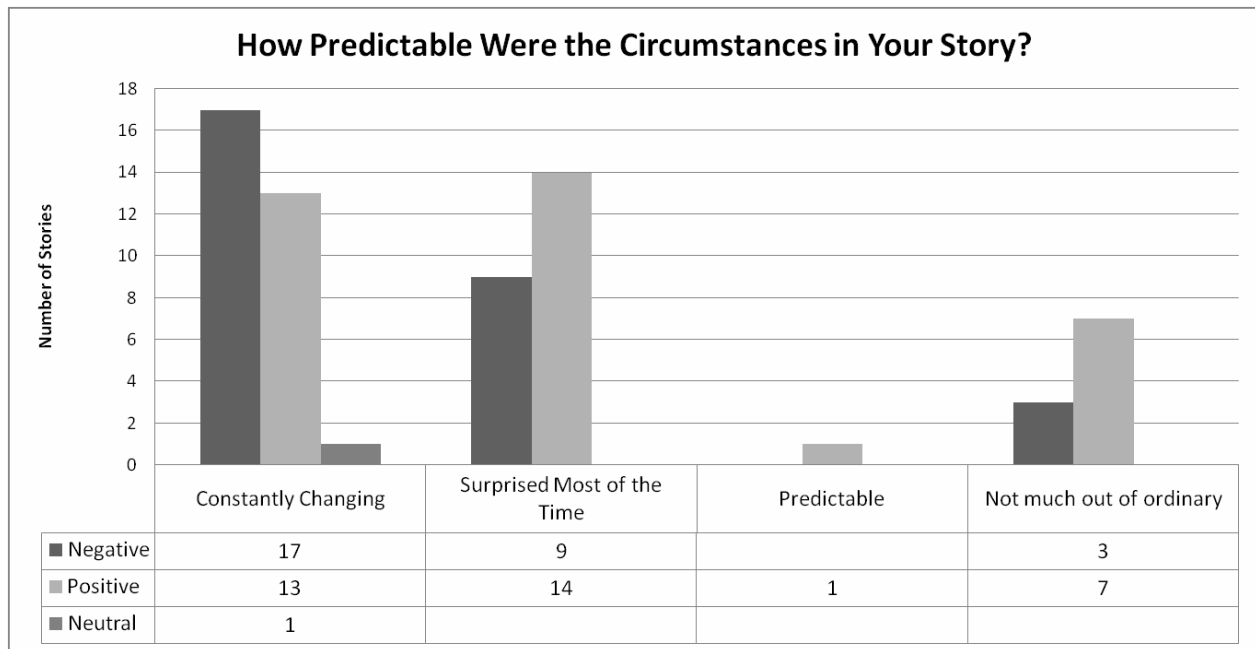
*yet why would I need you now?’ So we continue to kind of leave him alone and be there when we can. The week before his transition meeting when he was going to turn 18 he called in a panic...We were able to help him find a family that was happy to help him until he finished high school...He never lets his guard down, but he did this one time...he said, ‘my fear is that I am going to mess this up.’”*

## **Feelings and the Predictability of Circumstances in the Stories**

Participants were asked to label the predictability of the circumstances in the story they told. They could choose from the following items:

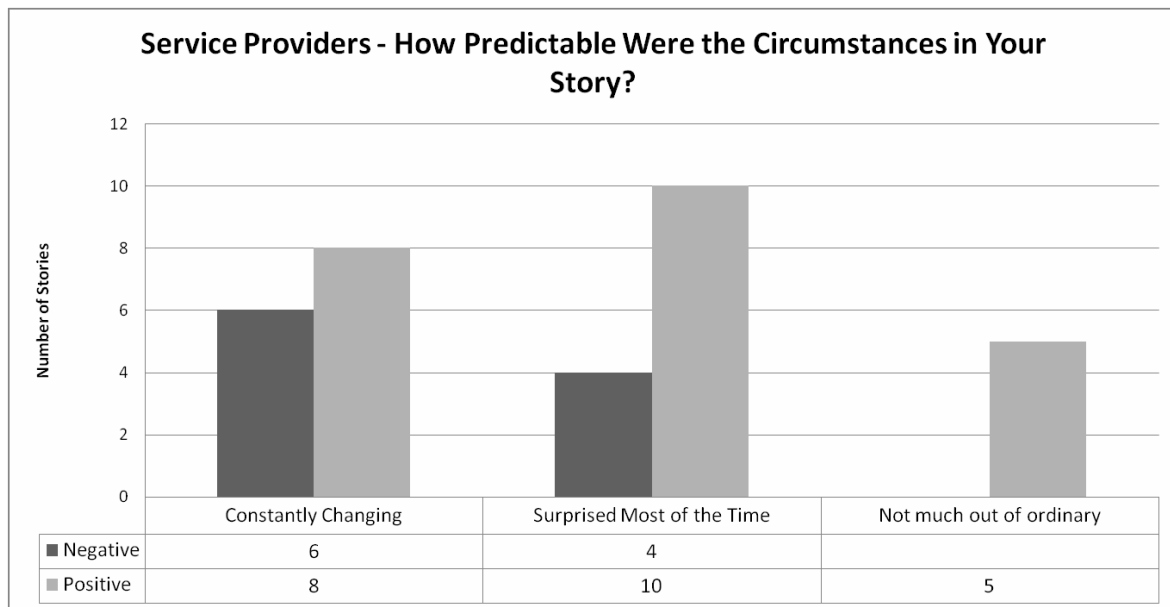
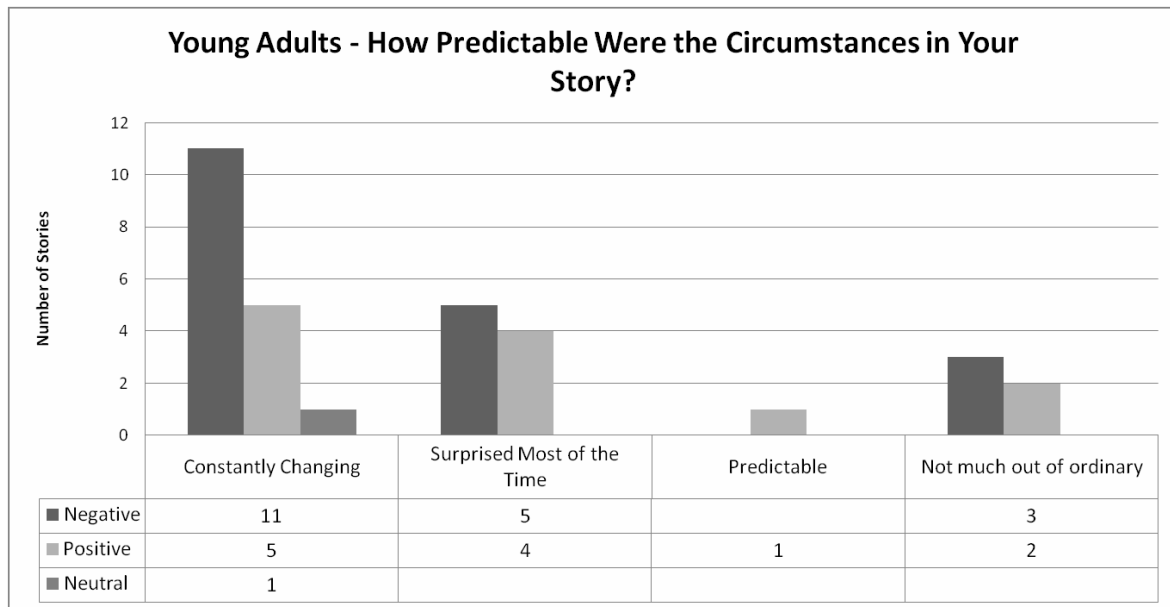
- ☐ Things were constantly changing; there was no way to predict what was going to happen next.
- ☐ I was surprised (or confused) most of the time in this story.
- ☐ There were not too many surprises; nothing too much out of the ordinary.
- ☐ I knew exactly what was going to happen from one step to the next.

Understanding how participants see the circumstances in their story helps to identify the types of situations they face. The predictability of the circumstances relates to the stability within the story context. Predictable stories typically involve circumstances with clear rules and boundaries whereas unpredictable stories may indicate highly interactive circumstances with unclear rules and/or boundaries. The chart below shows all of the stories organized by predictability and the feelings associated with the story.



This chart shows that about half (47%) of the stories told involved circumstances that were constantly changing. The majority, 17, of those stories had negative feelings associated with them. The second most popular category was Surprised Most of the Time. That category contained 35% of the stories with 14 positive stories and 9 negative ones. This pattern would indicate that the stories told by participants describe circumstances that are unpredictable and likely involving complex patterns of interaction. In addition, as the circumstances get more unpredictable the stories tend to get more negative.

The two charts below illustrate this pattern broken out by Young Adults and Service Providers. The first chart shows the breakdown for Young Adults and the second chart shows the breakdown for Service Providers. When looking at the groups separately it appears that the majority of the negative stories came from the Young Adults. While there is an overall pattern of negative stories increasing with unpredictability, that pattern was particularly strong for the Young Adults.



## Interpretation

By far the most common circumstances were described as “Constantly Changing” or “Surprised Most of the Time.” What is striking is the number of negative stories told by Young Adults in the Constantly Changing category. Many of the stories represented in the charts above have been quoted in the previous sections. These charts were included to illustrate the unpredictable circumstances that Young Adults and Service Providers face on a regular basis.

Operating in unpredictable circumstances often requires quick and adaptable decision making. A common way to deal with unpredictable circumstances is to adopt a learning strategy of trial and error. This is important to highlight because trial and error may be more challenging for people with traumatic histories (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). This theme re-emerged during the sense making session.

The next chapter will discuss the sense making session in further detail. Sense making is a critical component to any inquiry project; it is the process where meaning emerges from the data. I draw a distinction between analysis (or in this project catalysis) and sense making. Analysis provides a first look at the data organized by emergent and/or logical patterns of the data. In traditional inquiry the analysis (which is done by the researcher) is written up and becomes the final product, perhaps with some recommendations based on the findings. In this case sense making is done by individual readers. In this project, the analysis (catalysis) was simply the first step in organizing the data so that the community (the inquired) could then use it in their sense making process. Sense making, in this project, provided the participants with the opportunity to dive into their data and analysis for the purpose of making meaning together (through a social process) to determine the significance of their own findings and collaboratively determine their action steps. I would consider the participatory sense making as the most critical part of this project. The sense making session provided the community with a interactive social process for sense making. However, the rules governing the group interaction (social norms) were left intact. More specifically, the sense making process gives voice to many viewpoints (perhaps some previously unheard) but the group ultimately decides which voices to privilege over others. The meaning made through sense making is context sensitive both locally and historically.



## Chapter 14 - Sense Making

The IROCK collaboration hosted a “Sense Making Day” on May 21, 2010 for both Service Providers and Young Adults. It was an opportunity to more deeply explore the stories that were collected during the anecdote circles. Sense making is a critical component of any type of inquiry. In traditional evaluation models the sense making process is typically performed by the “evaluator,” or “professional.” In this case the sense making was performed by the Young Adults and the Service Providers. There were 8 Service Provider participants and 8 Young Adults. Some of the participants had contributed stories during the Anecdote Circle session and some had not. This was an intentional move in an effort to increase the diversity of experience and sense making within the group.

### **Sense Making Methodology**

The sense making day consisted of four major activities. The first three activities were completed with the Service Providers and Young Adults working separately. The last activity was completed with both Service Providers and Young Adults.

- 1. Extracting Sense Making Elements** - Participants were split into groups of four. They were each provided with a small set (5-6) of randomly selected stories (collected from the Anecdote Circles) and given a chance to briefly read through them (Service Providers and Young Adults worked with their own respective stories). Participants took turns reading a story aloud while other group members would write down elements of the story being read. Participants were instructed to focus on three types of elements; characters, situations, and values. These were written on sticky notes. Each participant would have the opportunity to engage in reading and extracting elements several times during the process.

- 2. Clustering the Sense Making Elements** – The sticky notes were placed on the wall grouped by type (characters, situations, and values). The small groups reformed to their larger groups (Young Adults and Service Providers) and they worked together to create clusters with the sticky notes. They were provided with little instruction other than to create clusters that made sense to them. After the clusters were formed they were named by the participants. The sticky notes were removed (leaving only the cluster name) and participants were asked to name 3 positive attributes of the cluster and 3 negative attributes. The attributes were written on sticky notes and placed next to the name. At this point the names of the clusters were removed and the positive and negative elements were mixed up and participants now had to re-cluster these attributes and provide a name to the new clusters. While this process is confusing in written form the purpose behind re-clustering is to help participants to move from surface (stereo-type) clusters to deeper (archetypal) clusters.
- 3. Placing the Clusters within the Cynefin Framework** – The two groups each built a framework based on the Cynefin Framework. The Cynefin framework helps a group examine their sense making elements in relation to the level of order and unordered present within the item (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). It consists of four loosely defined domains (Simple, Complicated, Complex, and Chaotic). The framework is emergent in the sense that it does not exist in isolation of context. It is described as being “built” because the boundaries are determined by the group doing the sense making.
- 4. Comparative Conversation and Issues, Recommendations, and Ideas List** – After working separately and building their respective frameworks the Young Adults and Service Providers came together to have a conversation about their frameworks. They

each took turns talking about their clusters and their rationale behind the placement of their clusters within the framework. They were asked to look at the similarities and differences between their frameworks. The conversation then shifted to using their new understanding to develop a list of Issues (items needing further exploration or items that were simply intractable), Recommendations (things the collaboration should be doing), and Ideas (things they may want to consider doing in the future).

### **More about the Framework**

The Cynefin Framework was developed by Snowden and Kurtz and was discussed thoroughly in the previous section. The framework was designed as a tool for sense making. It addresses the various ways in which decision making situations can be viewed. As a sense making tool it is not intended to represent concrete understandings but rather contextual understandings. It is possible that people can view the same subject matter differently. This allows them to visualize this difference and talk through how and why they see things they way they do. It is important to restate that the domains (simple, complicated, complex, and chaos) don't represent rigid categories with clear boundaries. Instead they represent gradients along the spectrums of unordered (self organization) and order (centralized control). This flexibility allows groups to have conversation and work out the various boundaries of the framework together in real time.

### **The Cynefin Frameworks Side by Side**

Below is a comparison of the two frameworks that emerged from the Sense Making session. The Young Adult framework is compared side by side with the Service Provider framework. The placement of the items are not to be interpreted as representing a universal understanding of that item but rather it is specific to the context of the group in Boise. These

highly contextualized frameworks allowed Young Adults and Service Providers to have a rich conversation about issues in their community. Each group (Young Adults and Service Providers) developed their framework separately. The placement of items on the framework represents the negotiated placement of the group. The items they placed on the framework were the clusters they developed earlier in the process. Participant did not see a four by four matrix version of the framework for their cluster placement. They were given a space with the four domains represented in each corner with no lines drawn for boundaries. They were intentionally given very little instruction on how to place the clusters on within the framework which created an environment of heavy cooperation and conversation. This process fully engages participants to clarify the meaning of their clusters and to clarify the meaning of the cluster's placement within the framework. The graphic below shows the completed frameworks with the names of the clusters. Below each framework you can find each cluster's detailed attributes.

| Young Adults  | Service Providers  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
|---|--|---------------------|---|--|---|---------------------|---------------------|---|---|
| <div>Complex: There are many answers.</div> <div> <b>Healthy Family Relationships</b><br/>           Support<br/>           Aspirations<br/>           Resources<br/>           Family         </div> <div>           Complicated: Experts know the answer.<br/> <b>Health and Welfare</b><br/>           Depression<br/>           Obtaining Resources<br/>           Needing Resources         </div> <div>           Chaos: There is no answer.<br/> <b>Unhealthy Family Figures</b> </div> <div> <b>Influences</b><br/> <b>Healthy Relationships</b><br/> <b>Bad Support</b><br/>           Simple: Everyone knows the answer.         </div> | <div>Complex: There are many answers.</div> <div> <b>Feelings</b><br/>           Concrete Supports<br/>           Behaviors<br/>           Outcomes<br/>           Relationships<br/>           Systemic Barriers         </div> <div>           Complicated: Experts know the answer.<br/> <b>Cost/Money</b><br/>           Income<br/>           Services<br/>           Essential Attributes<br/>           Simple: Everyone knows the answer.         </div> |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
| <b>Characters - People or Groups</b><br><b>Healthy Family Relationships</b> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Positive Attributes</th> <th>Negative Attributes</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>           Family<br/>           Close Relationship<br/>           Become Who You Are Today<br/>           Belonging         </td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>  | Positive Attributes  | Negative Attributes | Family<br>Close Relationship<br>Become Who You Are Today<br>Belonging |  | <b>Characters - People or Groups</b><br><b>Systemic Barriers</b> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Positive Attributes</th> <th>Negative Attributes</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td>           Intrusive<br/>           Enabling<br/>           Robbers of Souls<br/>           Unresolved Trauma<br/>           Unmotivated<br/>           Pets - Impact Where You Can Live<br/>           Die - Lose People<br/>           Intrusive<br/>           Overwhelmed<br/>           Confused<br/>           Paperwork         </td> </tr> </tbody> </table> | Positive Attributes | Negative Attributes |   | Intrusive<br>Enabling<br>Robbers of Souls<br>Unresolved Trauma<br>Unmotivated<br>Pets - Impact Where You Can Live<br>Die - Lose People<br>Intrusive<br>Overwhelmed<br>Confused<br>Paperwork |
| Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
| Family<br>Close Relationship<br>Become Who You Are Today<br>Belonging   |  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
| Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
|   | Intrusive<br>Enabling<br>Robbers of Souls<br>Unresolved Trauma<br>Unmotivated<br>Pets - Impact Where You Can Live<br>Die - Lose People<br>Intrusive<br>Overwhelmed<br>Confused<br>Paperwork  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
| <b>Healthy Relationships</b> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Positive Attributes</th> <th>Negative Attributes</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>           Support<br/>           Kinship<br/>           Stronger         </td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>  | Positive Attributes  | Negative Attributes | Support<br>Kinship<br>Stronger  |  | <b>Concrete Supports</b> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Positive Attributes</th> <th>Negative Attributes</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>           Resources<br/>           Hard Working<br/>           Money<br/>           Navigating<br/>           Knowledge<br/>           Advice<br/>           Advisers<br/>           Experience         </td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>   | Positive Attributes | Negative Attributes | Resources<br>Hard Working<br>Money<br>Navigating<br>Knowledge<br>Advice<br>Advisers<br>Experience |   |
| Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
| Support<br>Kinship<br>Stronger  |  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
| Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |
| Resources<br>Hard Working<br>Money<br>Navigating<br>Knowledge<br>Advice<br>Advisers<br>Experience   |  |                     |   |  |   |                     |                     |   |   |

| Resources  |   | Essential Attributes  |                     |  |   |  |  |
|--|---|---|---------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Positive Attributes  | Negative Attributes   | Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes |  |   |  |  |
| Assistance<br>Place to Go<br>Jobs<br>Opportunity<br>Help in Time of Need<br>Food and Shelter   |   | Support<br>Driven<br>Pride<br>Encouragement<br>Love<br>Helpful<br>Patience<br>Friendships<br>Nurturing<br>Resilient |                     |  |   |  |  |
| <b>Unhealthy Family Figures</b> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Positive Attributes</th> <th>Negative Attributes</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td>           Physical, Mental, Emotional Problems<br/>           Judgmental<br/>           Substance Abuse<br/>           Bad Influences<br/>           Invisible<br/>           Not Being Normal<br/>           No Trust<br/>           Loss of Intermediate Family<br/>           Bad Relationships and Fear<br/>           Bad Foster Homes         </td> </tr> </tbody> </table> |   | Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes |  | Physical, Mental, Emotional Problems<br>Judgmental<br>Substance Abuse<br>Bad Influences<br>Invisible<br>Not Being Normal<br>No Trust<br>Loss of Intermediate Family<br>Bad Relationships and Fear<br>Bad Foster Homes |  |  |
| Positive Attributes  | Negative Attributes   |   |                     |  |   |  |  |
|  | Physical, Mental, Emotional Problems<br>Judgmental<br>Substance Abuse<br>Bad Influences<br>Invisible<br>Not Being Normal<br>No Trust<br>Loss of Intermediate Family<br>Bad Relationships and Fear<br>Bad Foster Homes |   |                     |  |   |  |  |
| <b>Health and Welfare - Limitations</b> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Positive Attributes</th> <th>Negative Attributes</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td>           No Help<br/>           Limitations<br/>           Limited Opportunities<br/>           Liability<br/>           Lack of Funding<br/>           Limited Resources<br/>           Lack of Support         </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>   |   | Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes |  | No Help<br>Limitations<br>Limited Opportunities<br>Liability<br>Lack of Funding<br>Limited Resources<br>Lack of Support   |  |  |
| Positive Attributes  | Negative Attributes   |   |                     |  |   |  |  |
|  | No Help<br>Limitations<br>Limited Opportunities<br>Liability<br>Lack of Funding<br>Limited Resources<br>Lack of Support   |   |                     |  |   |  |  |

| Young Adults   |   | Service Providers  |   |
|--|---|--|---|
| <b>Situations - What is Happening?</b><br>Obtaining Resources  |   | <b>Situations - What is Happening?</b><br>Behaviors        |   |
| <b>Positive Attributes</b>   | <b>Negative Attributes</b>  | <b>Positive Attributes</b>                                 | <b>Negative Attributes</b>  |
| Resources<br>Casey Family Support<br>Health and Welfare<br>Seeking Help<br>Law Enforcement and Emergency Services  | Not Eligible  | Become Resilient<br>Helpful<br>Resourceful/Knowledgeable   | Enabling<br>Not Always Going to be Positive<br>Provider Driven<br>Want it More Than Youth |
| <b>Influences</b>  |   | <b>Relationships</b>                                       |   |
| <b>Positive Attributes</b>   | <b>Negative Attributes</b>  | <b>Positive Attributes</b>                                 | <b>Negative Attributes</b>  |
| Life Saving Preventing Overdose<br>Acknowledgement of Life<br>Raising Awareness<br>Consequences<br>Expose Abuse<br>Making Change<br>Counseling<br>Managing Behaviors | Discipline Environment  | They are Awesome!<br>Build Relationships<br>Supportive     | Boundaries  |
| <b>Depression</b>  |   | <b>Outcomes</b>  |   |
| <b>Positive Attributes</b>   | <b>Negative Attributes</b>  | <b>Positive Attributes</b>                                 | <b>Negative Attributes</b>  |
|  | Misdiagnosis<br>Detrimental to Health<br>Too Many Meds<br>Mental Distress<br>Irresponsible<br>Stereotypes<br>Allergic Reactions | Learn From Experience<br>Empowerment<br>Leads to Stability | No Services to Help<br>Sustainability<br>Repeat<br>Snowball                               |
| <b>Bad Support</b>   |   |  |   |
| <b>Positive Attributes</b>   | <b>Negative Attributes</b>  |  |   |
|  | Ongoing with No End<br>No Hope and No Faith<br>No Support<br>Abuse of Services<br>Unstable Family Figures                       |  |   |

| Young Adults  |  | Service Providers   |   |
|---|--|---|---|
| Values - Things People Need or Want   |  | Values - Things People Need or Want   |   |
| Family  |  | Cost/Money  |   |
| Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes  | Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes   |
| Offspring<br>Influential<br>Support System<br>Healthy Relationships<br>Kinship<br>Family Figures, Friends, Spouse | Unstable and Abusive<br>Substance Abuse<br>Demographic Challenges<br>Disappointing<br>No Knowing How to Communicate  |   | Budget Impact<br>Cost<br>Slum Lords<br>Not Enough Money   |
| Support   |  | Feelings  |   |
| Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes  | Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes   |
| Role Models<br>Helping Hand<br>Our Voice<br>Not Alone<br>Casey Family Programs                                    | Miscommunication<br>Unemployment/Welfare(abuse of)<br>Not Educated about Assistance<br>Lack of Support<br>Misuse<br>Homelessness/No Jobs<br>Good Intentions - Bad Representation<br>Peer Pressure/Bad Influence<br>Being Alone<br>Criminal History | Belonging<br>Support<br>Giving Back<br>Empathy<br>Cathartic<br>Therapeutic<br>Helpful<br>Knowledge<br>Comfort<br>Stability<br>Identity<br>Purpose | Too Close to Drama<br>Enabling<br>Stored Up<br>Painful<br>Bridges Burned<br>Medicate<br>Boundaries                          |
| Aspirations   |  | Income  |   |
| Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes  | Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes   |
| Job Opportunity<br>Simplifies<br>Representation<br>Pride<br>Achievement<br>Having Direction                       |  | End Poverty<br>Employment<br>Prevent Homelessness<br>Employable   | Not Able to Make a Living<br>Wage<br>Too Few Jobs   |
| Needing Resources   |  | Services  |   |
| Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes  | Positive Attributes   | Negative Attributes   |
| School<br>Working and Having Money<br>Financial<br>Family and Friends   | Lack of Money<br>Insufficient Services<br>Not Meeting<br>Transportation  | Prevention<br>Fill Need<br>On Radar<br>Good Health  | Negative Messaging<br>Lack of Access<br>Lack of Credit<br>Hard to Navigate<br>Lack of Transportation<br>Not Enough Services |



## **Developing the Issues, Recommendations, and Ideas List**

After the groups completed their frameworks separately they were brought together to share their final framework and discuss how and why it was constructed. The Young Adults and Service Providers spent time talking through the similarities and differences of their frameworks with each other. The conversation provided an opportunity for the two groups to “see the world through the other’s eyes.” The two groups talked openly about their clusters and their placement of those clusters. After the discussion of the frameworks the participants were asked to take what they just learned about each other and apply that knowledge in planning for the near future. The larger group (Young Adults and Service Providers) worked collaboratively to develop three lists; Issues, Recommendations, and Ideas.

### **Issues**

Issues represent items that don’t have an apparent answer. They are things that may require further investigation or just simply items that we will continue to struggle with in the foreseeable future.

- No swimming or other “high-risk” activities while in foster care.
- Can’t get a Driver’s License while in foster care.
- Housing
  - Difficulty finding stable housing
  - Lack of awareness about housing resources in the community
- Employment and Job Assistance
- Transportation continues to be a struggle for many young adults. There was a good conversation that highlighted how difficult it can be for an agency to provide transportation due to liability issues.

- Having access to relevant information - (See the Recommendations and Ideas list for possible solutions to this issue).
- Structure and Support to promote success for Young Adult Leadership - Several young adults expressed an interest in getting more involved but they weren't sure how. Also, they talked about how they feel like they are asked for information and they create ideas but then nothing happens as a result.
- Access to Mental Health Services after 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- Mental Health Issues in Birth and Foster Families - a few of the stories told by Young Adults during the anecdote circles including mental health issues within their birth and/or foster families.
- Over Medication of Venerable Youth - Young adults felt like they are targets for over medication in comparison to their peers. One young person said it creates a feeling of “resistance to all medications” even when there may be some they really need.
- Misdiagnosis - Several Young Adults joked about how everyone they knew has bi-polar disorder.

## **Recommendations**

Recommendations emerged as things that IROCK may want to begin doing immediately, or something they may need to do at a larger scale.

- Getting the Word Out - Young Adults felt like IROCK should make an effort to find multiple ways to inform the community about the services available.
- More Youth at the Table - This issue came with the caveat that there needs to be more interactive and interesting ways for youth to participate in the process.

- Get Foster Parents and Other Supportive Adults Involved - Foster Parents were seen as a resource for assisting Young Adults early on in preparing for adulthood.
- Smaller Focused Meetings on Different Subjects - Young Adults said they would like the opportunity to meet in smaller more focused groups to explore issues and create solutions.
- Young Adult Led Data/Information Collection - Young Adults expressed an interest in gathering stories and other types of information that can be useful to create positive change in the community.

## **Ideas**

The Ideas list represents those items that could be potential solutions for some of the issues that arose on the Issues list. It also represents some “out of the box” thinking by the group.

- Transition Housing for young adults 18 and over.
- Experiment with Different Methods for Getting the Word Out - People agreed that there should be multiple avenues for communicating what is happening in the community:
  - Facebook as a tool for communicating with youth. It may be worth investigating the creation of an IROCK Facebook page and twitter account.
  - Newsletter - Some people acknowledged that not everyone has access to the web and that having a Newsletter would be a nice alternative to electronic information.
- Young Adult Led Groups - While Young Adults were enthusiastic about wanting to lead groups they said they would appreciate help developing agendas and other supports to ensure success. They said their past experiences were not always positive.

- Spreading Data and Information Gathering Beyond the IROCK Group - Several people suggested that we look at collecting stories and other data from multiple people in the community and not just the immediate stakeholders.
- Avenues for Keeping Ideas Flowing - several people wanted to find a way to easily submit new ideas.

The lists above (Issues, Recommendations, and Ideas) represent one of the core outputs from the sense making session. In collaboration with the IROCK steering committee I synthesized the inquiry information into a final set of findings and recommendations which can be found in the next chapter. The five findings along with their implications and recommendations will be used by the IROCK steering committee for their next strategic planning session. The findings and recommendations in chapter 15 are representative of the case study. For a comprehensive set of findings in relation to using open source principals for distributing evaluation task among the group evaluated please see section four entitled *Lessons Learned*.

## Chapter 15 - Findings and Recommendations

In this chapter I summarize the findings, implications, and recommendations from the inquiry. This was the section I was hoping to write in collaboration with some of the participants. This however, was not feasible given time and location constraints. It is important

to note that this section is largely written based on all of the material produced during the inquiry project. So, while I wrote the information it is highly reflective of the participants' viewpoints as expressed throughout various stages of the project. This section was review by the IROCK steering committee. The steering committee noted that they felt the write up was very congruent with their experience of the whole inquiry project. The format for each finding is simple. Each finding is numbered, bold and followed by an explanation. The explanation is then followed by an implications section and a recommendations section.

### **Finding 1: Collaboration produces results easily identifiable in the narratives but potentially challenging to quantify.**

One third of the stories told by Service Providers involved some aspect of collaboration. The majority of the stories were positive and a few were negative. The positive and negative stories contained some consistent themes.

One benefit to collaboration elucidated in several stories is the personal connection developed between collaborative partners. This connection can speed the process of referrals and system navigation. Several participants spoke about the value of having more than just a phone number, as one participant stated “...*having a contact person there who knew me was great, I didn't have to make phone calls to people I didn't know.*” A personal connection between collaborative partners was sighted as speeding up the process of

acquiring services for young adults from various organizations in the community.

A more nuanced finding emerged from a cluster of themes. A social worker often serves the role of a “connector” and/or “navigator” of community resources. Developing expertise in this area requires one to become aware of available resources and gain an understanding of how those resources operate. Several stories highlighted this cluster of themes. Service Providers spoke about increases in their general knowledge of services in the area as a direct result of the collaboration. In addition, some Service Providers have changed their service delivery based on what they have learned from one another. Specifically, Service Providers have adjusted to reduce service delivery overlap and create smoother referral processes between agencies.

Two important themes emerged in the negative set of collaboration stories. Service Providers acknowledged there are times when they are working well together but the Young Adults may refuse services. One Service Provider called this situation “heartbreaking.” In addition to Young Adult motivation, Service Providers also acknowledged instances where cross agency communication and collaboration were good but some bureaucratic hurdle was impeding progress.

### **Implications:**

Understanding how this collaboration is impacting Young Adult outcomes was well beyond the scope of this study. In addition, the impacts appear cultural in nature. Specifically, the collaboration appears to produce better informed and more connected Service Providers within a more integrated service delivery network. An effort was made to elicit stories from Young Adults regarding their experience receiving services from multiple agencies. However, they told few stories in response to the question. This may indicate that

they didn't understand the question or may also indicate they don't see as much separation between agencies; in essence all Service Providers look alike through their eyes. It's a topic worthy of further exploration.

### **Recommendations:**

The IROCK collaboration can strengthen its already strong network by focusing on three key areas: Relationship Building, Community Resource Awareness, and Case Scenarios. It is important for collaborative partners to find ways to gain exposure to the array of services available in the community. However, it is equally important to establish solid relationships with the providers of those services. IROCK has a history of doing this well and should build upon this history to expand these opportunities to new partners. In addition, the collaboration may want to experiment with multi-agency case scenario staffing. Issues of confidentiality can easily be overcome by not revealing case details but rather discuss common scenarios without attributing names or other sensitive information. This practice can reveal the deeper more subtle inner-workings of each collaborative partner and lead to more productive referrals and innovative methods for dealing with bureaucratic and young adult motivation hurdles.

### **Finding 2: Young Adult stories and their framework displayed a high degree of unpredictability or constantly change circumstances.**

The stories told by Young Adults and their Contextual Framework that they built indicated a high degree of unpredictability in their environment. They are continually faced with circumstances that include many unknown factors such as a new placement, new job, new social worker, etc. The Young Adult stories included several themes where their seemingly stable environment breaks down into a more unpredictable and/or chaotic situation.

One poignant example included a Young Adult who had her rent check mailed

directly from the department of Health and Welfare to her landlord. This was an established practice put in place by the Young Adult, her social worker, and the landlord. However, the apartment building changed property management companies and this stable system broke down. She then received notice that her rent was overdue. Panicked she called her social worker. Together they discovered the check was delivered but the new property manager was unaware of the previous process and the check sat on her desk unopened. The Young Adult said that she didn't know what to do in the situation outside of calling her social worker. It is interesting to note that the Young Adult indicated that her social worker was the primary player in finding a solution.

### **Implications:**

Situations like the one above do not have cookie cutter solutions. They often require problem-solving skills and in most cases a workable solution can be found in a variety of ways as opposed to one specific “right” way. The primary way of navigating problem-solving territory is by trial-and-error. There is significant research showing that young adults with traumatic histories have deficits in problem-solving skills (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). Another way to think about learning by trial-and-error is safe-fail experimentation (as oppose to fail-safe). This implies an environment where one can fail safely and learn from the experience rather than failure equating to something catastrophic and not to be repeated.

### **Recommendations:**

It would be a good practice to examine the current services in the community and explore how many of them involve teaching problem solving skills. In addition, do services offer the opportunity for Young Adults to fail and safely recover? Based on stories collected during this project Life's Kitchen may be a service provider to explore further regarding how



they teach problem-solving skills. Life's Kitchen was mentioned in several Young Adult stories as a place where they can fail and recover safely.

**Finding 3: Young Adults need a “big safety net” and people that “will not give up on them.”**

This finding, which appears as self-evident, resonated through many of the stories told by both Young Adults and Service Providers and echoed the sentiment expressed during the Sense Making day. Service Providers told many stories where they pushed through a variety of barriers (including Young Adult reluctance to participate in services). Young Adults told a few stories, almost apologetically, where they describe going through a phase of not wanting any help and eventually being open to receiving help from others.

While this finding appears simple, reading through the stories reveals a more complex process. This issue involves the Service Provider's orientation (attitudes, biases, beliefs, etc.) toward the Young Adult, the Young Adult's orientation toward receiving services, and the service environment (the community) itself. All three of those elements are dynamic and constantly changing making this issue very complex, and not easy to deal with by applying simple solutions. Engagement is critical in maintaining a “safety net” for a Young Adult. If the Service Provider and/or the Young Adult choose to disengage the system breaks down into the proverbial “burnt bridge.”

From a service provision standpoint the only controllable element is the Service Provider's engagement. To make matters even more complex there seems to be a wide range of engagement “intensity” that can positively impact the situation. For example, Service Providers told stories where they took a “hands off” type of approach, letting the Young Adult take the lead on furthering the engagement. There are ample examples where this strategy paid off and

the Young Adult eventually accepted services received the help they needed. However, Young Adults told stories where their social worker took a very active and persistent role in their case. This was cited as a positive and also cited as what was needed at the time.

It is worth noting that when Service Providers told stories from their past (stories that were over two years old) they frequently referenced situations in which they lost their composure and the situation escalated. Based on the stories collected this type of situation seems more likely to happen with new Service Providers as opposed to seasoned Service Providers.

### **Implications:**

Not giving up on a Young Adult is something much easier to espouse as a principle than it is to carry out as a practice. There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to this issue. Rather, each situation will require a nuanced approach and there are likely a variety of approaches that will work, obviously some better than others. It is clear however, that a burnt bridge is a more difficult obstacle to overcome than a minimally-engaged Young Adult not currently interested in services. Based on the stories collected here are few of the factors that seem to affect maintaining engagement:

- Young Adults history with other services and providers.
- Young Adult motivation level.
- Young Adult age.
- Young Adult involvement in service planning process.
- Service Providers experience level.
- Service Providers history with that specific Young Adult.

- Personality issues – do the Young Adult and Service Provider like each other?
- The fit of Young Adult need with services available.

### **Recommendations:**

The IROCK collaboration is fortunate to have so many seasoned social service professionals. The collaboration should leverage that expertise to newer workers by way of story-telling and mentoring. For a new worker, hitting a wall with a Young Adult can feel like a failure. The more seasoned workers can provide support to these workers by normalizing this experience, through storytelling and mentoring, and reducing the likelihood of a burnt-bridge. In addition, this practice provides each member with a richer understanding of the services in the community. This increases the chances of Young Adults getting matched with the most appropriate Service Provider(s).

Another strategy to maintain engagement is to support Young Adult led groups. During the Sense Making session Young Adults expressed an interest in participating in focused support groups led by other Young Adults. This approach has been tried in the past but Young Adults cited a lack of Service Provider support as a key factor in these groups disintegrating. The Young Adults stated they wanted help with logistics (agenda setting, facilitating, etc.) while exercising greater control over the content. Young Adult led support groups creates yet another opportunity to keep Young Adults engaged.

**Finding 4: The six key areas of focus for IROCK (Employment, Housing, Education, General Life Skills, and Mental Health) appear to be very relevant for the community.**

The IROCK collaboration has six key areas of focus. One of the inquiry questions was to determine if these areas are relevant. The story eliciting questions did not address any of

these issues directly in effort to see what themes emerge “naturally.” Participants were asked to rate the level of need for each of these items as part of their profile information collected during the Anecdote Circles. In addition, the story content was examined for these issues.

Participants rated employment and transportation as the two areas with the highest levels of need. This sentiment was echoed in the stories and in the Sense Making session. Finding a job was the primary employment theme in Young Adult stories. This is not surprising given the 2010 unemployment rate for 16-24 year olds is currently 19.1% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). This is the highest rate on record. A key to finding and maintaining a job is having reliable transportation. Several stories highlighted inadequate public transportation.

Education and housing appeared in stories to a lesser degree than some of the other issues. Two distinct types of stories emerged for both education and housing. Some stories highlighted the need for these resources and/or the lack of opportunities. And, some stories highlighted a lack of awareness about opportunities that exists in the community.

General life skills were seen as a high need by Service Providers but Young Adults rated the level of need as low. However, Young Adult stories contradicted their rating. There were several stories where Young Adults felt ill prepared for adulthood. This can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the term “general life skills.” In addition, Young Adults may feel uncomfortable identifying that they need general life skills.

Mental health emerged as a prominent theme within many of the stories told by both Service Providers and Young Adults. It is expanded upon more fully in its own finding later in the report.

**Implications:**

Employment and transportation are difficult to address because they are heavily influenced by factors outside the sphere of influence of the collaboration. These types of challenges are difficult and multifaceted and will likely require a multifaceted problem solving approach. Education and housing pose similar challenges however it also sounds like there are opportunities that exist in the community that can be developed more fully.

Mental health and general life skills are more difficult to measure. You can assess whether or not a Young Adult has a job, adequate transportation, access to education, and housing. Assessing mental health and general life skills is far more subjective and complicated.

**Recommendations:**

It may be helpful to look at each of the six areas of focus with the following considerations in mind:

- How much influence do we (IROCK) have on this issue? (As opposed to influence from external factors such as the general economy).
- Who else in our community should be at the IROCK table? (This can increase your sphere of influence).
- What are the quantifiable elements and qualitative elements for each area? (For example, you can quantify if a youth is or is not employed but that doesn't tell you whether or not they are happily employed and likely to keep the job).
- How can IROCK take action in the areas it can influence?
- How can that action be measured for success?
- How can we amplify our successes?

**Finding 5: Further inquiry is needed to better understand the impacts of Mental Health issues the Young Adults and their families are facing.**

The subject of mental health emerged in a variety of ways. Both Young Adults and Service Providers that participated in the story gathering sessions were asked to rate the level of need for Mental Health services. Both groups rated the level of need as low. However, the stories told by both groups contradicted this rating. Their stories included many issues related to mental health. The most common mental health themes were:

- Over diagnosis (specifically Bi-Polar Disorder). The Young Adults joked that everyone they know has Bi-Polar Disorder.
- Over and under medication.
- Mixed messages regarding medication. Several youth reported receiving conflicting information from mental health professionals, teachers, social workers, family, etc.
- Dealing with a birth-parent and/or other family member with mental health issues.
- Lack of services and access to medication

**Implications:**

Mental health can mean different things to different people. There are often social stigmas associated with talking about mental health issues. In addition, in child welfare mental health encompasses a wide range of meaning from serious diagnosable conditions to a general sense of well-being. This makes a discussion on the topic of mental health difficult without providing a specific context.

**Recommendations:**

It would be helpful to develop a more detailed list of mental health issues and address them at a more specific level. This can be accomplished by developing small focus groups that take on specific topics to learn more about the issue and develop recommendations for how to address these issues in the community. Further narrative inquiry could be helpful to explore community attitudes toward mental health issues.

## Chapter 16 - Study Limitations and Strengths

From a traditional research stance this study has several limitations. First, although the design of this inquiry was narrative in nature it is still important to point out that the data collected were primarily stories, or anecdotes, told in a self-report format. These data will represent the inherent biases of those individual views. While this may be viewed by some as a limitation it is important to note that it was part of the design of the inquiry. From a social construction stance, it is assumed that all inquiry has some bias built in because inquiry takes place in a local historical context. Secondly, the size of the group poses a limitation on how the findings may be interpreted. There were a total of sixty-five stories collected from a total of twenty-six participants. For the most part, participants were self-selected or recommended by a collaborative partner. This group may not be representative of the larger group.

A clear strength of this inquiry is in the use of multiple methods and the depth of information collected from each participant. In addition, the data collected were collaboratively coded and key stakeholders performed the clustering and sense making of the data. While the group was relatively small there was a good mix of different people participating in different aspects of the inquiry. Some of the story tellers did not participate in the sense making and some of the participants in the sense making did not participate in the story telling. This provided more diversity in data collection, analysis, and sense making. Stakeholders were able to interact with the data in a variety of ways. The Catalysis Report provided them with view of the various patterns created by the metadata collected in relation to the stories told. The clustering and naming of elements provided stakeholders the opportunity to dive into the narratives and extract themes that were relevant to them. Placing the clusters onto the Cynefin framework provided stakeholders the opportunity to create a visual representation of their experiences in relation to



the level of order and unordered. Finally, the facilitated discussion provided stakeholders the ability to leverage their new understandings into action items for the group. The inclusion of Young Adults was a significant strength as reported by the Service Providers. The Young Adults reported they appreciated having their voice woven into the inquiry. Several of the Young Adults reported that past efforts of inclusion consisted only of invitations to meetings whereas this process seemed to provide Young Adults direct access to the key stakeholders making decisions regarding service provision in the community.

## **Section 4 – Lessons Learned**

### **Chapter 17 - Reflections**

Inquiry from a social construction orientation as I have described in this dissertation treats knowledge as an emergent interactional process. Similar to grounded theory, the categories and coding to produce findings come first and foremost from the data in an ongoing analytical process that takes place through every step of the inquiry. In addition, grounded theory reserves the literature review for the end of the process, after the analysis and sense making has been completed (Charmaz, 2006). I would like to take a similar approach in this section. I did provide a literature review in Sections one and two of this dissertation, but they focused on the knowledge, experiences, and information that guided my thinking before and during the project. However, there was a substantial amount of new information I discovered after the project. I discovered it in part, because I now had new insights and questions (based on my findings) that I wanted to explore further. I believe this is an important part of a social construction inquiry project. A social construction inquiry project should contain a fairly substantial post inquiry reflection section, which I am simply calling “Lessons Learned.” There were two projects within this dissertation. One project was the evaluation of the Boise collaborative partnership. The case study provided in the previous section summarized that project’s findings. The second part of this dissertation project was the testing of open source principles to distribute the process of evaluation across a group (I use the term “open source principles” as a summary term for the material in section 1). This final section entitled Lessons Learned will apply specifically to second part of this project.

Why is reflection important? I believe reflection is important because the inquiry process itself changes the inquirer and inspires new questions and “primes” the inquirer to find new

discoveries, possibly even in previously reviewed information. I can illustrate this concept with a story that describes what I informally call the “Oprah Effect.” I once saw an amazing video of Jill Bolte Taylor, a brain researcher, describing in vivid detail her own experience of a stroke (Taylor, 2008). I was so moved by this video I told my wife about it. It should be noted that I tell my wife about a wide range of topics, some of which interest her and others in which she listens mostly out of courtesy. Given the vast array of topics I talk about, it was not readily apparent whether this video would be of interest to her. She showed interest but not enough to take the time to watch the video. I continued to tell her about this video for a few days but we never found the time to watch it. Then, one day I received a call from my wife where she enthusiastically told me about an amazing woman she saw on Oprah. It did not take long for me to realize she was talking about Jill Bolte Taylor. After hearing about the story on Oprah my wife then wanted to see the video I was talking about.

This rather simple story illustrates a very important issue. We are constantly filtering information based on our current context. My wife did not have a contextual frame for the video when I was telling her about it because she was unaware if it was something in the category of things that interest her or something that merely interests me. When she encountered the story on Oprah, it then became interesting to her and she became “primed” to seek out additional supporting information on the subject. Similarly, the inquiry process, if conducted in a participatory fashion, should change the participants involved. By continually engaging people in the analysis process, they build a rich contextual framework where they become primed to seek out further information. Such was the case with me. Upon completing the project I found myself revisiting material that I had already read, but now reading it with new eyes it meant

something different to me. In addition, I made new links to new information as I became primed to see it.

## Chapter 18 - Revisiting the Research Questions

In the previous chapter I mentioned that the dissertation is comprised of two projects.

The first project was the evaluation of the IROCK collaborative partnership, which was summarized in the Case Study section. The second project in this dissertation was to apply open source principles to distribute the process of evaluation across a group. There were two questions I wanted to explore in relation to implementing open source principles. First, could evaluation be broken into smaller tasks and distributed across the group that is being evaluated? Second, could that same group conduct and author the major parts of the evaluation? The first question was answered affirmatively in this project. The tasks of data collection, analysis, and sense making can be broken into smaller tasks and distributed to many participants. The second question, which has two parts, was partially answered. The group did serve as the primary evaluators but authoring their own evaluation did not get fully realized. The group provided tremendous input and my write up was largely based on their input, however, I was the one who physically put the final report together.

I firmly believe there is tremendous potential in developing open source type methods for conducting inquiry. Open source methods are congruent with social construction ideas but perhaps even more promising is the ability to take social construction inquiry to a larger scale. One of the first types of criticism you encounter about social construction or other types of qualitative analysis is that the sample size is too small to draw any general conclusions. There is only so much narrative data that can be processed. Nearly a century ago Gabriel Tarde envisioned the potential for large scale sociological study, where one could easily navigate from large scale phenomenon and plunge into the complex details of that phenomenon. The only problem was that the resources needed to manage such a large web of information were simply

unattainable at the time (Barry & Thrift, 2007). Social science has a history of collecting information, analyzing it, making sense out of it, and then publishing the results. While the overall process gets talked about in the published results, the actions associated with data collection, analysis, and sense making are lost. For example, a reader of such a published document cannot journey beyond the written page and drill down to the response of one particular person. One cannot interact with the published results in a way that could lead to conclusions that differ from that of the author. This lack of traceability presents the aggregated phenomenon as having qualities in and of itself, disembodied, from the actors that contributed to the phenomenon.

For this project I wanted to embody the findings into the context in which they occurred. To accomplish this I included the data contributors (the participants) in the sense making process directly. During sense making they began to extract themes and patterns while having the ability to trace information back to an original story. However, I will be the first to admit that my result came far short from what I envisioned. Later, in chapter twenty, I will talk more fully about what I envision for the future of large scale social construction inquiry.

While participants readily engaged in sense making they seemed far more reluctant to participate in authoring the content. I am not ready to say that this is not attainable. Far from that, I think sites such as Wikipedia provide us with real life examples of multi-user generated content. The issue I faced was that I could not break down the authoring tasks into small enough components to make participation easy. The authoring tasks were ambiguous in terms of their scope, meaning a participant could not quickly assess how long the task would take to complete. I found that people are much more tolerant of ambiguous outcomes than they are with ambiguous timeframes. For example, during the sense-making session there were several tasks

where the instructions were clear for the specific task, but there was little information as to how that task would fit into the overall project. Participants were not always clear why they were doing a particular task, they simply received instructions for the tasks and were given some finite measure of time (e.g. thirty minutes) to complete it. The participants seemed willing to suspend their resistance when the task was clearly defined and time limited. The Wikipedia parallel would be that someone interested in writing an article about blood-borne pathogens, for example, does not have to be concerned with how that article aligns or does not align with other Wikipedia articles. The contributor(s) can focus solely on that one article. The aggregate of Wikipedia is a by-product of this type of activity, rather than a seemingly pre-ordained-self-contained whole. The tasks for sense-making in this project were easily broken down in this way where the overall aggregate of the day (the findings) emerged as the by-product of many interactional negotiations of meaning between the participants. The writing tasks were more difficult to break down partially because the notion of what to write was unclear. In my own drive to satisfy the participants I gave them a draft write up of the project that resembled a very technical traditional evaluation report. The report was over thirty pages long and the participants did not like it. My initial thought was that they did not like it because they were not involved in the writing process. While that may be true, the primary reason that emerged in their words was that it did not seem to capture the essence of the sense making day. I later provided them with an eight page summary of the findings, which was simply organizing material they produced during the sense making session. This was met with resounding approval. What I learned is that they did not need the explanation of what we did and why we did it. They did not need the explanation because they were there and they did it. What they wanted were the findings so they could use them to generate their next steps for action. This aligns with the concepts of chapter three

entitled “When Good Enough is All you Need.” The participants did not need the technical write up, they did not need the report to look a certain way or conform to any standards. They simply wanted the parts that provided them with utility.



## Chapter 19 - Re-envisioning the Social in Social Science

It would stand to reason that social science is the scientific study of social phenomenon. But, what is meant by social phenomenon? Is society something other than a group of individuals? Does an individual need a society to exist? These are just a few of the questions that continue to challenge social science. Perhaps these challenges have more to do with the questions themselves rather than what the questions represent. The questions as stated make a distinction between social and individual. However, what if we conceive of the social and individual as two aspects of the same phenomenon, similar to the conception of light as both a wave and a particle? The closer we inspect the social the more we lose sight of the individual and the more we inspect the individual the more we lose sight of the social. This dilemma exists because we have not had the interactional tools to easily navigate between individual and social. This separation between individual and social can lead to the social taking on an identity separate from the individual. In this sense, the social becomes endowed with qualities and it becomes a thing, a concept promoted by Gabriel Tarde's contemporary Emile Durkheim (Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, 2005). Tarde was not opposed to the idea of smaller parts, which he often called monads, he simply did not believe these smaller parts aggregated into a collective whole. The parts are born of each other, not of the collective self. Tarde sees no need for a collective-social-self because there are no individuals to make up the society. He sees the individual as a monad, a representation of a vast network of other elements that can be divided into smaller and smaller monads ad infinitum. "This is why his theory of science is so original: science is in and of the world it studies. It does not hang over the world from the outside. It has no privilege. This is precisely what makes science so immensely important: it performs the social together with all of the other actors, all of

whom try to turn new instruments to their own benefits” (Latour, Tarde’s idea of quantification, 2010).

The social is a complex web of interactions between many monads. Quantification needs to take place at the most individualized levels rather than at the aggregate. A social scientist, from this perspective, will be most interested in gathering lots of information about individual people and retaining the traceability of that information back to the individual once aggregates are formed. The aggregates are not pre-ordained ordered outcomes, rather they are the by-products of various types of interactions. If the traceability has been maintained, these by-product aggregates are no longer disembodied from the individual interactions but rather firmly rooted in them. In this way, social theory can be reformulated continuously and new explanations can emerge as we examine and re-examine the path between individuals, their interactions, and the aggregated by-products.

What is a social scientist to write about? How does one publish their findings in this view of the social as a complex web of interactions? Obviously there is no one “right” way to write about a project. However, I do believe the Internet is providing us with some key clues to how we can organize our projects in ways where readers can interact with the data and draw their own conclusions and perhaps even contribute to the inquiry process. My vision for future inquiry is expanded in the next chapter.

## Chapter 20 - Reinventing Research as a Platform

What do Youtube, Google Blogger, and Flickr all have in common? They are all considered “platforms.” What is a platform? A computer platform is a combination of hardware architecture combined with a software framework. Unlike blueprints, which provide detail instructions on how to create something that has been preconceived, a platform is a general set of hardware and software, with a general notion of usage intent. What a platform becomes is an emergent by-product of the people using it. Youtube was created to provide people with a simple video publishing platform. Google blogger was created to provide people with a content (writing and images) publishing platform. Flickr allows users to easily publish and share photographs. The rules for usage are kept very general allowing individual users to use the platform in the best way that suits their needs. There are no “right” ways to use these platforms. Individuals can use it and they will either get utility out of it or they will not. That utility is determined however by the individuals using the platform. For example, Lady Gaga, the popular singer, would likely want her videos on YouTube to reach as many people as possible. However, milosmommy, the user that published the video that helped me fix my television likely did not have such an ambitious goal. Perhaps the goal was simply to help a few people who had the same problem with their television. The utility is not predetermined by the platform. This is the future I imagine for social construction inquiry. If we created a platform for inquiry, what would it look like?

It is important to remember that platforms are built upon general ideas of usage with lots of flexibility for individuals to create new ways of using the platform. A social construction inquiry platform would therefore be built upon three basic components of an inquiry project:

Data Collection, Analysis, and Sense Making. I will provide a basic explanation of each component in the following paragraphs.

Data collection is a fundamental first step in any inquiry project. The social inquiry platform would provide some basic templates for creating new user profiles for any member of the inquiry project (meaning for both inquirers and the inquired if they happen to be separate people). In addition to creating profiles for users there would be a variety of tools to help design methods of data collection such as surveys, story collection, media collection, or any other type of questionnaire. The tools and architecture would be there to provide these avenues of inquiry but it would be up to the inquirer(s) to develop the content of the questions and surveys. The platform would allow users to create a “project” which would then contain the material specific to that project. For example data collection related to a project entitled “Teen Transportation Issues” would be confined to that specific project. User profiles on the other hand, would be specific to the user and could be used in other projects. In this way, the user creates a profile once, and can participate in many projects without having to create a new profile. Project content could be wide open to any form of content that could be digitized such as text, photos, graphics, videos, etc. For example, a member of the Teen Transportation Issues project could upload a map of their neighborhood showing the locations of bus stops (or lack thereof). Each user could generate a variety of content along a spectrum of structured to unstructured content, meaning some content may be related to specific inquiry questions and some content may be loaded because it was of interest to that particular participant. Once the project begins to accumulate content then the analysis can begin to take place.

Analysis is another important part of an inquiry project. Analysis within a social construction paradigm should be ongoing and performed by as many participants as possible.

Analysis provides opportunities to look at the data in a variety of ways and it is the precursor to sense making. Within a social construction inquiry platform there would be two primary modes of analysis. First, utilizing a computer's amazing computing capacity, the data collected from all sources could be aggregated for pattern detection. For example, continuing with the mock Teen Transportation Issues project, let's say there was a question asked of participants regarding if they use public transportation as their primary mode of transportation. The answer to that question could easily be linked to other aspects of their profile information such as age, race, gender, etc. There are a myriad of possibilities for computing large amounts of information to find patterns. Second, analysis could be conducted by individual participants. This may come in the form of labeling or "tagging" various types of information in the project to begin forming a common vocabulary for certain patterns. Individual participants could provide analysis and commentary that could be entered into the platform as additional data for the project. As the project gains more and more information the process of sense making can begin.

Sense making is the primary objective in an inquiry project. Ultimately we inquire into something because we want to understand it better. The social construction inquiry platform would present a variety of methods for sense making. Sense making could also be done outside of the platform, meaning you can still have a variety of large group methods used for sense making and then enter those findings or results into the system. However, there would be substantial avenues for individuals to find, discover, and interact with project information and formulate their own conclusions and share those with others. As more and more people share conclusions and define courses of action, people can begin to implement some of these solutions and provide additional information on the outcomes of their efforts. As more users interact with the system there will become more and more ways of understanding the information presented.

No view would be privileged over others, instead users would be able to see a variety of views and sense making around each topic or element of information. Again, this information can be reformulated with other information. For example, imagine if two main narratives emerge in the Teen Transportation Issues project, one that finds the public transportation to be adequate and one group that finds it to be lacking in coverage for the whole city. Since all information is traceable, one could find the percentage of public transportation users in each group. You could then possibly see that those finding the coverage to be lacking are also those that most rely on public transportation and live in rural areas. This discovery may be part of the sense making or it could be something that emerges later as more questions get asked. The key is that if the information is in the platform it can be reviewed at any time, even long after the project was considered “over.”

This type of project may produce a written report that covers the usual areas of literature review, methodology and findings, but it can also refer readers to the project site. Once at the project site a reader can interact with the data, ask questions of the data and perhaps even draw new conclusions that they could then share on the site. This type of research platform would allow for continual interaction with data and continual emergence of new ideas. Today most inquiry projects are time limited and end with the published results only. Projects in the social inquiry platform would have the ability to transfer data sets, findings, and any other digitized information from project to project. Most social problems are not problems to be solved but rather problems to be managed (I do not mean managed in a hierarchical sense but rather in a “we must all deal with this” sense). The platform I am describing would allow for continual data collection, analysis and sense making. In this way, we could develop a deep understanding of

the issues we face and the solutions that seem to provide the most utility to people. As time, people, and circumstances change so too will the findings of the project.

I was able to incorporate several aspects that I listed above into this project with the exception that I did not have a platform to use. I had to use a variety of tools to manage the information and it was not all in one place accessible to all participants. What I described above is the direction I will be moving toward in my future endeavors. There are many obstacles to overcome, including the most basic issues of access and comfort levels with technology. There are also issues of privacy, power, ethics, copyright law, etc. While those issues seem daunting, there are plenty of examples of mass collaboration (such as Wikipedia) and the usage of the Creative Commons License that are posing new and interesting solutions to these challenges. I believe a social construction inquiry platform would allow for both small and very large scale inquiry projects and would offer us new ways of thinking about social science.

## Chapter 21 - Closing Remarks

This project has truly been an amazing journey. I learned a great deal about social science, inquiry and myself. I am excited to venture into more inquiry projects and the development of an inquiry platform. Developing the platform will not be something I can do on my own and I encourage any interested parties to contact me on how to develop such a platform. I see great potential in the way we move forward in understanding and dealing with the challenges we face as humans. In the nearly four years I have been working on this project I have witnessed amazing changes in the way we conceive of information. We are quickly moving from an orientation to information as a commodity to be bought and sold to an orientation to information as something that can be freely shared. The Internet can no longer be thought of as something for just a unique few or a passing fad. In the last three years the Internet has been used to coordinate revolutions in Iran, Egypt and Moldova, to name a few. The Internet has connected millions of people through applications like Facebook, which if Facebook were a country it would be the third most populated country in the world (Lur, 2010). The Internet provides a very unique and distinct ability to trace information from individual to aggregate or aggregate to individual.

As we develop tools that can provide multiple views and interpretations of issues we will hopefully begin to develop multiple ways of finding solutions to our most complex issues. The IROCK collaboration in Boise Idaho is doing just that. They are beginning to look at the issues facing youth aging out of foster care as multifaceted issues that require more than a single approach to address them. They are taking the findings from our project and using that as a springboard into asking even deeper questions. In addition they are trying out multiple interventions and reporting back to one another regarding which ones seem to be working.



Overall, they have reported a greater sense of connection amongst themselves (the service providers) as well as a greater sense of connection with the young adults they serve. I believe this project is one small example of how we can begin to dismantle the notion of inquirer as a person with a set of skills and traits and reinvent the inquirer and inquired as two sides of the same coin, similar to seeing the individual and society as two sides of the same coin. The findings of social construction inquiry should be representative of the participants because the findings are simply aggregated variations of the individual participant contributions. In addition, findings will not be thought of as a static set of information, but they will be thought of dynamic and ever changing with the context in which they occur. We don't take the temperature once and declare it is seventy-eight degrees all the time. We take the temperature when we need it. Similarly, we will interact with data, analyze, and make sense of information when we need it. The data will always be there and will continue to accumulate. Our ability to make sense out of the data will grow and change as we grow and change. And, the future will be whatever we can dare to imagine and move toward together.

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# Appendix A – Informed Consent Form

## **Informed Consent to Participate in an Anecdote Circle for Service Providers and Community Partners**

### **Study Purpose:**

- Stephen Shimshock, PhD-student at Taos-Tilburg University, is conducting research into using low/no cost resources from the Internet with the purpose of helping collaborative groups and their stakeholders to participate in a self-assessment/evaluative process. Anecdote circles, similar to focus groups with less structure, is an opportunity to listen to “stories in the wild.” An anecdote is a short story about a specific event, typically told autobiographically. The purpose of the Anecdote Circles is to collect information that will provide collaborative partners and key stakeholders a story-based data set. This data set, which will be anonymized, will be used later in Sense-Making sessions where participants will engage in deriving meaning from the anonymized anecdotes collected. The goal is to engage both service providers and stakeholders in learning about your community and planning/coordinating services based on what is learned.

### **Participation:**

- You are participating in this one-time Anecdote Circle.
- You are also invited to attend the Sense Making session in the future. If you are interested please contact Stephen Shimshock ([sshimshock@casey.org](mailto:sshimshock@casey.org)).
- We expect the Anecdote Circle to take approximately one and one-half hours.
- We ask that you fill out the Participant Background Information form, which asks several demographic questions, but requires no name or other personal identification.

### **Risk:**

- There is risk that another participant in the group may violate confidentiality and share with someone outside the group information that was spoken here.
- You have the right to not answer questions during the Anecdote Circle that may make you uncomfortable.
- Please respect the group’s trust and confidentiality.

### **Benefit:**

- The benefit of participation is that you get to help shape the story in your community about the kinds of resources, services, relationships and supports that young people need in order to be successful. Ultimately, there is potential to improve the way America supports its young people as they transition into adulthood.

### **Voluntary Participation:**

- Participation is completely voluntary.
- You have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason, without penalty. You also have the right to withdraw from this Anecdote Circle without penalty. Your decision whether or

not to participate in this research study will in no way affect your future relationship with Casey Family Programs.

- We would like to audio record this Anecdote Circle, because it helps us capture exactly what you say. If any of you do not feel comfortable about having this conversation recorded, we will not do so. Do we have your permission to record?

**Confidentiality:**

- Participants are asked to keep the Anecdote Circle discussion confidential. For reporting purposes, individual responses will be kept confidential. Anecdotes or stories from this session will be anonymized prior to be used in future Sense Making sessions. If you would like to review your anecdote/story prior to its use or if you decide you do not want it used in the Sense Making session please contact Stephen Shimshock ([sshimshock@casey.org](mailto:sshimshock@casey.org)).
- Audio files and written notes will be heard and seen only by members of the evaluation team, will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and/or password protected computer files, and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

**Contact Information is available:**

- If you have any questions or would like additional information about this evaluation, please contact
- Stephen Shimshock, Manager of Practice Technology, at (206) 216-4178 or at [sshimshock@casey.org](mailto:sshimshock@casey.org)
- Dr. Harlene Anderson, Research Advisor, Houston Galveston Institute [harleneanderson@earthlink.net](mailto:harleneanderson@earthlink.net)
- Karen Tao, Research Analyst, at (206) 282-7300 x 12104 or at [ktao@casey.org](mailto:ktao@casey.org).

## Appendix B – Story Teller Profile – Service Provider

Idaho Resources Opportunities Communities and Knowledge (IROCK)

Anecdote Circle for Service Providers

Participant Information Form

Participant Identifier: \_\_\_\_\_

Questions about the participant:

1. How many years have you worked in social services? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What types of experience do you have in social services (Check all that apply)?
  - ☐ Direct service
  - ☐ Supervisor
  - ☐ Director
  - ☐ Data Collection and Reporting

Please rate the level of need for young adults in the following areas.

|                     | Only a few young adults I know needs help in this area. | About half of the young adults I know need help in this area. | Almost every young adult I know needs help in this area. |
|---------------------|---|---|--|
| Transportation      | <input type="checkbox"/>                                | <input type="checkbox"/>                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>                                 |
| Housing             | <input type="checkbox"/>                                | <input type="checkbox"/>                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>                                 |
| Employment          | <input type="checkbox"/>                                | <input type="checkbox"/>                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>                                 |
| Education           | <input type="checkbox"/>                                | <input type="checkbox"/>                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>                                 |
| Mental Health       | <input type="checkbox"/>                                | <input type="checkbox"/>                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>                                 |
| General Life Skills | <input type="checkbox"/>                                | <input type="checkbox"/>                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>                                 |

# Appendix C – Story Teller Profile- Young Adult

Idaho Resources Opportunities Communities and Knowledge (IROCK)

Anecdote Circle for Young Adults

Participant Information Form

Participant Identifier: \_\_\_\_\_

Questions about the participant:

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Approximately how long were you in foster care?

☐ Never in Foster Care

☐ Less than 1 year

☐ 1-2 years

☐ 2-5 years

☐ Over 5 years

Please rate the degree to which you need assistance with the following topic areas.

|                     | No help needed, I've got this covered. | I could use a little help. | I need big time help with this. |
|---------------------|--|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Transportation      | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/>        |
| Housing             | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/>        |
| Employment          | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/>        |
| Education           | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/>        |
| Mental Health       | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/>        |
| General Life Skills | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/>        |

## **Appendix D – Story Eliciting Questions – Service Providers**

### **Story Eliciting Questions for Service Providers:**

1. Think of a time when you had to arrange services across multiple agencies for a young adult. Please talk about a time when coordinating these services went really well or a time when it didn't go so well?
2. Picture a time in the future when you are perhaps 70 or 80 years old. Looking back on your work with young adults, what experience do you believe you will remember and still be retelling?
3. Talk about a time when you made what you thought was a “small” gesture but it seem to make all the difference in the world to your client.
4. Take a moment to reflect on your encounters with young adults. Have you ever worked with a client and thought “I wish every young adult was just like this person is right now?” Or, perhaps you had an experience where you thought “Every young adult should avoid being like this?” What happened?
5. Have you ever heard a young adult say something like, “Leave me alone, I know what's best for me, I don't need your help?” Can you talk about an experience where no matter what you tried you just couldn't connect or get through to the young adult? Or you can talk about a time when you were able to get through and things changed?

## Appendix E – Story Eliciting Questions – Young Adults

### Story Eliciting Questions for Young Adults:

1. Have you ever had an experience where you worked with multiple service providers at the same time? Can you recall a time when you wished things were better coordinated, or can you recall a time when you surprised at how connected and smoothly things worked?
2. Picture a time in the future when you are perhaps 70 or 80 years old. Looking back on your life, what experience from your transition into adulthood do you believe you will remember as a “turning point” in your life? (it could be a turning point that led to better things or one that made things worse – or you may be in the middle of it right now and it’s too soon to tell)
3. Take a moment to reflect on your encounters with people in the helping profession. Have you ever worked with someone and thought “everyone in the helping profession should be just like this person is right now?” Or, perhaps you had an experience where you thought “nobody in the helping profession should ever be like this.” Have you ever had an experience like this? What happened?
4. Have you ever felt like saying, “Leave me alone, I know what’s best for me, I don’t need your help?” Can you talk about an experience where you didn’t want any help and you did things on your own and things turned out great? Or, can you can talk about a time when you tried doing something on your own and learned the hard lesson of asking for help?
5. Imagine you just met someone. They recently turned 18 and had to move out of the foster home where they lived. They tell you that they are a bit scared and unsure about how to get housing, a job, etc. They ask if you know anyone they could talk with and get some help. Who would you refer them to and why? (It may be someone in the helping profession but it could also be a friend, pastor, etc.)

# Appendix F – Questions About the Story

Participant Identifier: \_\_\_\_\_

## Questions about the stories:

1. In the space below provide a title for the story that summarizes what the story is about.
2. How do you feel about the story you told (Select one of the following)?

|   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeful                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Happy                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excited                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relieved                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please fill in):<br>_____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeless   |
3. What impact would you like this story to have on others (Select one of the following)?

|   |
|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I hope this story informs people.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I hope this story motivates people to change.                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I hope this story will help people see things from a different perspective   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I hope this story highlights an issue that nobody seems to be talking about. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I hope this story (please fill in) _____                                     |
4. How long ago did this story occur?

|  |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than a month ago |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1-6 months ago        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6-12 months ago       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 years ago         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> More than 2 years ago |
5. How common are the circumstances in this story?

|   |
|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> This is the way it always goes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Very common                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat common                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not that common                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not common at all              |
6. How would describe the circumstances in this story?

|  |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Things were constantly changing; there was no way to predict what was going to happen next. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I was surprised (or confused) most of the time in this story.                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> There weren't too many surprises; nothing too much out of the ordinary.                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I knew exactly what was going to happen from one step to the next.                          |